Indian Defence Forces: Preparedness to Counter 21st Century Challenges

V P Malik

Introduction

The changing nature of threats, challenges and vulnerabilities in the 21st century pose a danger to India whilst having direct implications on the preparedness of the Indian defence forces. These are inclusive of rising uncertainties, emerging destabilising factors, diverse, complex and invisible challenges whose precise nature is hard to predict. Hegemonism and power politics, impact of globalisation, resources and financial crises, failed and failing states, trans-national crime, global terrorism, spread of weapons of mass destruction are a few of the pressing challenges that face the defence forces and need to be dealt with adeptly. In addition, prolonged instabilities in the neighbourhood, with the emergence of China as a superpower, the massive arms build-up in the immediate region and challenges posed by the revolution in military affairs (RMA) and territorial disputes with China and Pakistan, coupled with the nexus between these two nations are bound to have serious politico-security consequences for India. In addition to these external challenges, there are grave internal security challenges such as insurgencies in the northeast, Jammu and Kashmir, and the Naxalite-Maoist movement. All of these pose a challenge to the country's external and internal security. Moreover, non-military threats such as illegal migrations, global warming, security of oil and water resources, environmental security, weak governance, proliferation of small arms, gun running and drug smuggling and politico-criminal nexus are realities that need to be dealt with on an urgent basis.

General **VP Malik** (Retd) is former Chief of the Army Staff.

Spectrum of Conflict

An assumption, described by Admiral JC Wylie in *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power* is, "Despite whatever effort there may be to prevent it, there may be a war." This assumption is neither being provocative nor a justification for the existence of the armed forces in peace-time. Military history tells us that nations that neglect this historical determinism make themselves vulnerable to military surprise, defeat, and ignominy. The assumption, therefore, is a reminder to the strategists to visualise security threats, the possibility and nature of conflict (or war, when political negotiations no longer serve the purpose) and to always remain prepared for such an eventuality. Another basic assumption for war planning is that we cannot predict with certainty the pattern of war for which we prepare ourselves. It has seldom been possible to forecast the time, place, scope, intensity and the general tenor of a conflict. India's conflicts with Pakistan and China, military involvement in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict in 1987, and the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are examples of the same. This is particularly true in the current and futuristic strategic scenario wherein the war potentials are more transparent and the intentions more inscrutable. This assumption implies that our security plans should cater for the complete spectrum of conflict—a spectrum that will embrace any conflict situation that may conceivably arise. India's military strategies and doctrines must be flexible and non-committal, capable of application in any unforeseen circumstances. Planning for uncertainty is less dangerous than planning for certitude. Trends and statistics of the last 50 years have shown that the armed conflicts around the world have been gradually moving down the paradigm scale of intensity as well as inclusivity. Potential nuclear war has given way to restrained nuclear deterrence. Total war, even a conventional war, has yielded to "limited war", "restricted war", and several types of "low intensity conflicts." The empirical evidence points towards a significantly lowered probability of a regular high intensity war, leave alone a regional protracted war. With the paradigm shift in the nature of military and non-military security, the military has a tougher job today to be prepared for this elongated spectrum of conflict ranging from aid to civil authority, counter-terrorism, different levels of conventional war, to a war involving weapons of mass destruction.

Future Roles and Missions

The Ministry of Defence has spelt out the roles for the defence forces that include defending the country's borders as defined by law and enshrined in the Constitution and protecting the lives and property of its citizens against terrorism

and insurgencies. It also aims at maintaining a secure, effective and credible minimum deterrent against the use or the threat of use of weapons of mass destruction, along with securing the country against restrictions on the transfer of material, equipment and technologies that have a bearing on India's security, particularly its defence indigenous research, development and production to meet the nation's requirements. A futuristic mission would also be to promote further cooperation and understanding with neighbouring countries and implementing mutually agreed confidence building measures, working with Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries to address key challenges before the international community and engaging in cooperative security initiatives such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF). Moreover, there is a need to pursue security and

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strategic dialogues with major powers and key partners as well as to follow a consistent and principled policy on disarmament and international security issues based on the principles of supreme national interest. However, it should always be kept in mind that changes in the security environment, grand strategy and military strategy dictate the military doctrines, shape and size of armed forces.

The required capabilities for missions across the full spectrum of conflict include the ability to fight limited or full-scale conventional wars. There should be rapid deployment of forces to deal with border skirmishes and tri-Service task forces for out-of-area contingency missions. There is an urgent requirement for specially equipped and organised forces for counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, proxy wars and other internal security (IS) deployments. The tri-Service strategic forces are meant not just for deterrence but also for having the capability of a wide range of nuclear responses, options and ability to defend space assets. The defence forces are required to be well informed in order to deal with cyber information and psychological warfare capability. Integration of air and sea power at strategic, operational and tactical levels needs to be addressed to deal successfully with the broad spectrum of conflict.

Revolution in Military Affairs and Net-Centric War

In the field of technology, changing faster than ever before, the industrial character of armed conflict capabilities is shifting to a new form that is based on knowledge and information. This RMA has three basic constituents: firstly, the integration of new technology into existing weapon systems and integrated command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR); secondly, review of tactics and strategy which enables effective use of new weapons and equipment in the given terrain and operational circumstances; and, lastly, institutional changes for better defence management and synergy.

Synergy among these three constituents can bring about the RMA. It enables continuous surveillance and precise surgical strikes on command and control nodes, strategic facilities, combat reserves, and combat support facilities in depth. It also enables getting at the adversary's nerve centres, with precision attacks or through electronic warfare and cyber attacks. Cyber war will be to the 21st century what *blitzkrieg* was to the 20th century. The net-centric war (NCW) concepts rest on the premise that the power of force grows proportionate to the extent of networking among the weapons, sensors and the command and control elements. NCW enhances awareness and reduces the time for decision-making at higher levels of command. Rapid and responsive military operations require timely and accurate reconnaissance reports, weather monitoring, precise navigation and long haul fail-safe communications. Furthermore, Indian aspirations for RMA would remain unfulfilled till we are ready for the NCW. The foremost requirement is a communication network, which allows interoperability of the highest order among all constituents of the war-fighting machinery. Transformation of forces to bring them in conformity with RMA concepts and technologies is making slow progress although efforts are being made to upgrade intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, particularly those of space-based platforms and to attain NCW capability.

The sooner an intervening force arrives to influence the course of a military event, the greater are its chances of success, and it reduces the chance of the conflict devolving into a firepower intensive, wasteful slugging match. Rapid reaction outpaces the enemy, and has the same asset as surprise. A tri-Service Rapid Reaction Force is required for border emergencies and out-of-area contingencies. Such a capability requires specially organised and trained formations with the ability for a cold start; adequate means for rapid transportation; and, strategic relocations of combat formations, which take a long time to be moved and deployed.

Integration, Jointness and Inter-operability

Defence policy and planning has to be based on collective defence forces' influence with optimum utilisation and effect of military power and potential, not on that of any individual Service. Furthermore, synergy is the key to success and it can be ensured only when our war-fighting aims, goals, resources and techniques are harmonised by a single doctrine. Capabilities require greater tri-Service integration or jointmanship. On the hi-tech battlefields and in the seamlessly integrated battlespace of tomorrow, only tri-Service "joint" operations that are jointly conceived, jointly planned and jointly executed are likely to succeed in achieving mission objectives. The experience since the 1980s has been that external and internal security is meshed more than ever before. Much greater liaison, coordination and inter-operability are needed by the armed forces with the intelligence and other agencies responsible for internal security. It also requires compatibility of equipment, as much as possible, particularly the communication equipment.

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Modern armed forces all over the world are carefully integrating individual Services to prepare them for joint warfare for greater synergy in orchestrating operations. This is invariably undertaken in the face of heavy opposition as individual Services resent and stubbornly resist change. In the last National Security Review, this weakness was identified. The Group of Ministers (GoM) had recommended the creation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), chief of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). His role was outlined to be: single point military advice; administrative control and management of strategic forces; head Joint Commands; be responsible for perspective planning and to ensure intra and inter-Service prioritisation of defence plans; ensure improvement in "jointness" among the armed forces, work for improvement in uniformity of training, and reduce overlaps; and, serve as the Review Board for promotions up to command level. The Indian armed forces' inability to achieve the requisite jointness in defence and operational planning, and training is due to the absence of a CDS. Clearly, without a CDS, the Integrated Defence Staff cannot perform coherently or effectively.

Possibility of Nuclear War

Due to the horrendous destructive power of nuclear weapons and almost certain universal condemnation, the probability of their use would remain extremely low. But as long as there are nuclear weapons around, they *could* be used. Soldiers do not have the luxury to rule out such a possibility. Nuclear weapons are meant for deterrence and India's nuclear doctrine is based on credible minimum deterrence, no first use, civilian control and survivability of the warheads and delivery systems. However, the progress on development of the triad i.e. land, air and naval-based launch systems is far too slow, leading to the question as to whether it is political or technological problems that are hindering the government to push this programme forward. The nuclear doctrine calls for full integration of doctrines: armed forces, foreign policy, atomic energy, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and several other elements. Thus, do our political leaders have the knowledge and the will to employ nuclear weapons in times of crisis? We have an inter-Service Strategic Forces Command. However, the Services have yet to develop a joint operational doctrine on the employment of nuclear weapons. They have also to interface the nuclear capability with conventional capability, and reassess military strategy and force structuring.

Defence of Space Assets

China's demonstration of its skill in shooting down a satellite has forced the Indian military to look at protecting Indian satellites and other space assets. An Integrated Space Cell has been established to protect India's space assets; which hopefully, would be a precursor to a tri-Services Space Command.

   Today is the age of information war where new forms of war reporting catch events at their source, when they are still history's raw material. It is not possible to resist the pressure to be transparent. The lesson learnt could be: don't try to seal all lips. Analysts, journalists, investors, employees, or members of the public consider knowledge of situational information to be their right, an entitlement rather than a luxury. During the Iraq War, the US government managed its communications effort from the very top. It appointed a brigadier (Vincent Brooks), one of its brightest officers, to deal with daily briefings at Central Command Headquarters in Qatar. In Washington, the secretary of defence and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff held almost daily meetings with the Press. The information war structure in India suffers due to lack of trust between the political leadership, bureaucracy and the military.

Internal Security

India has a unique centrality in the South Asian security zone. It has special ties with each of its neighbours — of ethnicity, language, culture, and common historical experience or shared access to vital natural resources. India's special ties with its neighbours tend to encourage the Indian secessionist groups in establishing safe sanctuaries across the borders in neighbouring states; trans-border illegal migration, gun running and drug trafficking. Situated as India is between the Golden Crescent and the Golden Triangle, secessionist groups taking to violence find little difficulty in indulging in the drug trade and obtaining small arms.

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Some of the specific issues that India faces and which have an impact on internal/national security include problems of national assimilation and integration, particularly of border areas in the north and northeast. There are porous borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, which enable illegal trans-border movements and smuggling of weapons and drugs. Many people think that by erecting fences on our international borders, we can stop all illegal trans-border movements, something that is not correct. Weak governance, including the law and order machinery, and large-scale corruption, is yet another issue that needs to be addressed since more and more people are getting disenchanted with social justice owing to sustained decaying of the political, administrative, and security institutions of the country. There is a growing nexus among crime, insurgency and politics, with 45 per cent of India's geographical area, covering 220 districts, in the grip of insurgency today. In the last 20 years, over 65,000 people have been killed in terrorist violence and the insurgency problems of Jammu and Kashmir and the northeastern states are well known.

Emerging Challenges

Strategically, India cannot afford to be perceived to be buckling down under internal security or externally induced terrorist pressures. That would be disastrous. Firstly, we have the deep-rooted constitutional problem of law and order being a state subject and internal security of the union government. The Constitution has vested policing authority in the state governments. This is a

problem of political will and consensus. The state governments refuse to recognise the linkages between basic policing and internal security. They have neither the money nor the inclination to upgrade the quality of the state police or to raise extra forces. The politico-criminal-police nexus is increasing. The central government seems incapable of affecting the quality of policing — a source of much of the problems in managing internal security. Secondly, there is greater emphasis on VIP security than on "beat policing". The crime rate in India is increasing sharply. The Centre has raised 354 central police and paramilitary force battalions (including 220 battalions for border guarding); 25 more battalions are to be raised in the near future. But unless the law enforcement agencies across the country are reinvigorated, well trained, equipped, and managed, we cannot hope to use them effectively to achieve the desired results. This cannot happen unless the state governments implement the recommendations of the National Police Reforms Commission of 1979 and the recent orders from the Supreme Court — not half-heartedly, as is being done in some states, but in letter and spirit. Thirdly, reduction in army deployment will be possible only if we can revamp the paramilitary, central and state police forces. We have to modernise these forces, improve their leadership, training and man management.

Higher Defence Control and Human Resources

Security and defence related issues are seldom debated in Parliament. The leadership has failed to evolve a comprehensive national security strategy. Although consultation between the civilian leadership and the armed forces has improved since the 1960s, it is personality-oriented and has not been professionally institutionalised. Service chiefs are consulted at operational level but seldom at the strategic level and never on modernisation or human resources (HR) issues in the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). The defence secretary, and not the chiefs, represents the Services. Political neglect has degenerated into bureaucratic control over the armed forces. Quite naturally, this has had an adverse impact on the state of preparedness for war. In the discussed war/war-like scenarios, politico-diplomatic factors will play an important role. Careful and calibrated orchestration of military operations, diplomacy, and domestic political environment is essential for its successful outcome. Continuous control of the 'escalatory ladder' requires closer political oversight and politico-civil-military interaction. With conflicts becoming multi-dimensional, the armed forces require geo-strategically aware and specialised political guidance. We need to reorganise the

networking system of the armed forces within, and with other government and non-government agencies that have an important role to play in a future war.

The armed forces have always been proud of their unequalled tradition of selfless devotion to duty, sacrifice and valour. The revolution in military affairs notwithstanding, the intangible but most awesome asset in conflicts and emergencies has always been the Indian soldier and his leader. The Indian soldier is a remarkable human being, one who is spiritually evolved, mentally stoic and sharp, physically hardy and skilled. Young officers have always displayed sterling qualities. They provide the immediate leadership, motivation, and the inner strength to the troops to overcome danger and hardship in the execution of near-impossible tasks. During the Kargil War, we were short of tangible assets, but very strong on courage, determination, camaraderie, leadership and morale. The spirit was very strong. Currently, this asset is seriously threatened and seems to be on the verge of becoming extinct. There is an acute shortage of officers since young men and women with acceptable leadership potential are not joining the armed forces in adequate numbers, and those within, want to leave. Moreover, the rising deficiency of middle and junior officers has started impacting the operational efficiency, administration and morale at the unit level. The manifestations of stress, strain and low morale are visible.

After the Sixth Pay Commission Report, the feeling in the armed forces is that their status is being deliberately eroded, the military leadership has no say, and the government is insensitive to their problems. There is considerable despondency amongst serving officers, men, their families, and veterans. Ex-Servicemen and war heroes are displaying their medals as also frustration, despondency and anger in public. This is good neither for the armed forces nor for the country. In such a state, how will India's defence forces deal with 21st century challenges? Who is responsible for bringing things to such a pass? This is a challenge for all our political leaders.

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Conclusion

Recent wars have involved a much greater level of integration of politics and military planning and execution. Even when diplomacy has run its course and a decision to employ the military is made, the political leadership seldom allows autonomous conduct of the war to the military. In practice, we are seeing a continuing erosion of the dividing lines between war and politics. In the new military conflicts environment, I believe that some of our large size combat organisations can be reduced in size; made more mobile, more versatile and more flexible. It is time we started thinking about greater combat effectiveness of our special forces, combat groups, commands and battle groups and other equivalent formations. Having several large, unwieldy and expensive strike corps for conventional deterrence that tend to sit out of the war when it actually happens is not a cost-effective military strategy. The emphasis has to be more on quality, not on quantity.

Currently, our operational planning caters more for reactive, all-out conventional war settings; much less for proactive limited war scenarios. A reactive strategic culture tends to erode our deterrence capability. In the current strategic environment, there is a need for the defence forces to prepare contingency joint plans, which can be implemented at short notice/during the course of mobilisation. This requires a higher degree of jointness in defence and operational planning and, hence, the urgent need for the CDS.