
Redefining the Role of Military Power in India

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Introduction

India inherited a battle hardened military that owed its allegiance to the British, with the redoubtable reputation of winning wars in distant lands. Post independence, the Indian military quickly changed its loyalty to the motherland and proved its worth in saving Kashmir from the raiders and also consolidating India's frontiers. The inherited ethos of unflinching loyalty and dedication makes the Indian armed forces what they are today. In fact, it is to the credit of our military, that the Indian nation is a physically intact entity today. This has been continuously achieved despite meagre resources, largely obsolete equipment, a most glaring shortage of officers and perpetual attempts by various forces to belittle the armed forces, especially in the media from time to time.

In today's context and also for the future, the role for today's armed forces cannot be confined to the maintenance of the borders, but needs to be seen as one which also looks within and beyond borders. To protect the country internally as well as defend our strategic frontiers, there is a need to embed the role of India's military in its internal as well as foreign policy. If India is to take its place in the comity of nations and emerge as a regional or global power in the coming decades, there is definitely a need to reestablish the role its military has so far been entrusted with.

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Traditional Role of the Military

The traditional and primary role of the armed forces as defined by the Constitution of India is “to preserve national interests and safeguard sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of India against any external threats by deterrence or by waging war.” The armed forces have carried out this role, to the best of their abilities ever since independence, despite all odds. The armed forces have time and again fought just as steadfastly as they had for the British in foreign lands. In fact, the steady economic progress that the country has seen over the last few decades can largely be attributed to a relatively peaceful environment that the country has enjoyed thanks to peace on the borders. However, this is increasingly seen as a role of the military being ‘mere *chowkidars* (sentries) on the borders’ rather than defenders of the nation’s integrity. This role is seen as being synonymous to that of an individual guarding a building or a bank.

But the last three decades have also seen a shift from the primary role that the armed forces of the Union were initially designed for. This is being seen as a secondary role that the Indian armed forces are currently undertaking. This can be defined as “to assist government agencies to cope with ‘proxy war’ and other internal threats and provide aid to civil authority when requisitioned for the purpose.” While the armed forces continue to uphold the responsibility for their primary role, it is the secondary role that now takes centre-stage at the national level and in the media. To maintain a fine balance between the two roles is a challenge that our military leaders have overcome with great vision and aplomb. No other armed forces in the world have faced such challenges in their own countries, and it is to the credit of our military leaders that we have thus far come through with the world looking at us with amazement.

As though the primary and secondary roles were not enough to handle, our armed forces over the last five decades, have slowly but steadily taken on a tertiary role, so to say. This role could be defined as “to assist the United Nations (UN) in peace-keeping and peace-building anywhere on the globe and thereby contribute to world peace and harmony.” This role has been accomplished with such dedication and application that India today is one of the largest contributors of UN contingents in West Asia and Africa. This role has also given India a limited power projection capability of about two brigades by default. Of course, the two brigades cannot still be airlifted in one go, but still there is a capability that exists. The Indian armed forces have carried out this role so exceedingly well that the world body (UN) looks only for Indian military leadership when it comes to deploying UN missions anywhere in the world. There are numerous instances of the UN asking for our

senior military leaders by name, for heading very crucial and important missions. The execution of this tertiary role, done so exceedingly well, has given India a unique status and position in the world. It is probably for this reason that there is increasing support for India's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

The South Asian Milieu

A lot has been written and is being written on the situation in South Asia. In fact, South Asia is the bread and butter of strategic thinkers of the world. Thus, the issue is dealt with only briefly. So, if one looks at the map of Asia, especially South Asia, it is seen that it is dotted with many smaller countries that surround India. Some of these countries continue to have a regressive medieval outlook and violent approach to inter-state relations. This approach is in direct contrast to, and contradicts, India's multi-religious, multi-cultural policy that promotes unity in diversity. The danger from this approach adopted by India's neighbours is being witnessed in the creeping invasion, demographic change and ethnic cleansing of minorities that has occurred in Kashmir, parts of Assam and the Northeastern states of India.

Also, India today, is ringed by failed or near failing states. Pakistan, to quote Maj Gen G D Bakshi, SM, VSM (Retd), "continues to be on perpetual drip to keep afloat." Every time that Pakistan is on the brink of imploding, the US has promptly come to the rescue and given that country billions of dollars that make it last for a few more years. The story is no different for Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. These countries also continue to remain afloat on doles given by the US, China and Japan. Of course, China not only continues to pose a conventional and nuclear missile threat to India, but also seems to be the mastermind, that influences or uses as proxy, our neighbours in every possible way, to weigh India down. In a nutshell, India's 14,058-km-long land frontier, is being continuously impacted by a hostile or semi-hostile environment. All the failed or near failing states continue to export instability, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, arms, fake currency and drugs into India. This is the then the South Asian faultline, which our neighbours fully recognise and are bent upon exploiting to the hilt. As India embarks towards expanding her influence on a regional and global scale,

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the adverse situation that is prevalent internally, as also the situation in the region, needs to be addressed very holistically.

India's National Objective

India today has all the prerequisites, and a very great potential, of becoming a major power within the coming few decades. It remains a strong democracy that is worth emulating by her neighbours and, more importantly, it is seen as a country that has no hegemonic intentions. The economy is rising at the fastest pace in the world. It has a most powerful and free media in the region. But all of this would need to be balanced in the backdrop of the internal

situation and the dangerous situation in the region.

Hence, our leaders need to introspect and formulate a national objective for the country. One suggested national objective could be to “make India an eminent regional power by 2020 that will integrate and influence the entire neighbourhood through economic preeminence and military diplomacy.” To achieve such a national objective, India has to adopt a strategy to strengthen relationships with existing friends and, at the same time, add new strategic partners to the list. Also, mere economic power, without military power, will not give India its place in the comity of nations. Foreign policy will need to depend on the strength of two pillars, i.e. economic power and military power. Only then can India hope to gain a position of preeminence in the region.

India as an Economic Power

India needs to be rapidly transformed into a low cost, high-tech research and development (R&D) hub of the world. For this, India needs to leapfrog the infrastructure and technological gap. Our information technology (IT) brains are the best in the world but presently, they deliver the goods only to foreign countries. But due to a huge gap in adequate infrastructure, we still do not develop any technologies in-house. Also, like China, India needs to become a low cost, but unlike China, a high quality, manufacturing centre that the world looks to, for meeting growing global demands. India has a young, educated and energetic demographic profile. This vast pool of trained youngsters is waiting to be tapped. It only requires the right policies and

incentives to propel India to greater heights. Where the government needs to give emphasis is in creating the right infrastructure and even more improved higher education.

A perceptible change is sweeping the entire Indian society with generation next being extremely focussed, assertive and restless to impel India to great power status. Rapid but closely monitored economic growth alone can harness this vast energy of 500 million young people. Entrepreneurship, which has been the hallmark of development of all developed countries, is another key area where our policies are being revisited. The opening of the Indian economy in the 1990s and liberal economic policies have begun to bear fruit. But so far, economically, India is still not considered central to South Asia. For this, our foreign policy towards our smaller neighbours is slowly changing with the Look East policy and other such initiatives which are bringing our neighbours closer to us, at least on the economic front. India's economists have realised that we need to include India's neighbours in our overall economic growth matrix. If the entire South Asian population is seen as one, then the consumers and the markets that are still lying untouched and unexploited are more than those of the entire United States and the European Union (EU). For inclusive economic growth of South Asia, India will need to be the key player, and for this, the Indian multinational corporations (MNCs) can play a vital role for wealth generation in the region. India needs to allow its home-grown MNCs to set up bigger joint ventures in our neighbourhood. Control of economic activity through huge investments and commitment in all neighbouring countries, will truly make India central to South Asia.

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India as a Military Power

India is well embarked towards becoming a global economic power thanks to our eminent economists having been given relative freedom to evolve policies that are beneficial to us. But the same freedom to eminent military thinkers to evolve military policies in consonance with the emerging threats and requirements has been lacking thus far. Many bigger powers, for fear of future competition in the international pecking order, continue to join hands in support of states such as Pakistan to increase

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India's costs on internal and external security. There is a very common cliché that does the rounds in strategic circles. It goes thus, "China will fight India to the last Pakistani." The aim is to continue to force India to spend less on economic growth, with ever increasing expenditure on security. Thus, to defend its economic interests in an unstable and mostly authoritarian Asia and also to protect its freedom, India will need to redefine the role of its military power so as to enhance its efficacy and reach. From this redefined role will emerge the military capabilities that India will need to develop for the future.

The unique geo-strategic location of India, with vast coastal areas protruding out into the Indian Ocean, makes India ideal to be a great maritime power. However, to be able to deploy its military

capability in a manner that is wholly acceptable to the international community is where the challenges for both our political and military leaders lie. The stellar role that the Indian Navy has been quietly playing in providing security to own ships from pirates off the coast of Africa, displays our capability to project military power in the region. But the matching strategic capability with the air force and the army is woefully lacking. The weapons and equipment held by our armed forces are mere 'hand-me-downs' from foreign countries. The technology is mostly outdated and, in many cases, obsolete.

To become a true regional military power, India will also need to leapfrog yet another technology gap. This gap is in the field of defence technology. With the population of Western nations now ageing; and with India slowly improving its infrastructure and brimming with young blood, the Western countries are increasingly finding India as the preferred destination for their defence industries. Enormous mutual benefits can accrue, if India can bridge the defence technology gap so as to make it a world class R&D centre and manufacturing global hub for cutting edge military industry. This will need cutting edge thinking and far-sighted vision in our leaders—leaders who understand the importance of technology in defence manufacturing and industry. The Indian defence R&D and military production needs to be thrown open to the private sector under a regulatory regime. Being self-reliant in the latest defence technologies through strategic partnerships and

technology transfer, will make India the military power that will help sustain its economic growth. There is need for a radical shifting of gears to gain the advantage by opening up the field to private sector companies that can have tie-ups with foreign partners to kick start complex defence projects. With better defence technology available, the latest equipment will be manufactured within the country. The enhanced capabilities that will as a result accrue to the military will automatically enhance its efficacy and reach. In fact, defence technologies have been very successfully used for civilian use. Thus, if high end technologies are developed in the country which are of dual use, the same will vastly contribute to economic growth of the country.

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In the conventional roles, placing a large part of our military power on the borders or for internal security or to just protect the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ); continued status quo in these roles will not ensure future security of the nation in its entirety. India as a country will need to define her strategic frontiers. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had stated that India's influence extends from the Horn of Africa to the Strait of Malacca. India's military power needs to have the capability of power projection beyond its borders to be able to secure the sea lines of communications for trade and commerce, secure the EEZ, ensure coastal security and be able to provide energy security along energy supply routes.

The above analysis amply establishes that the role of India's military power hankers to be redefined given the emerging international trends and India's future role in the region and also globally. While this paper addresses the need for a new role for our military, the details of this new role will need a separate study.

Conclusion

India's economy has developed because of the fact that eminent economists were given the charge of carrying out economic reforms. But India's military power has grown mostly by default rather than by design with the core issue of the role that this military power will play in the coming decades being left unaddressed. Economic reforms have undoubtedly poised India at the threshold to becoming an economic power in the coming decades. Some analysts say that India will overtake China in economic growth by 2030. But China has become the world's second

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largest economy by overtaking Japan. So will India be able to overtake the Chinese economy? Will China even allow India to overtake its economy, given India's archaic military power? As has been discussed in this paper, for India to grow economically, it has to grow militarily side by side. Both economic and military power has to be enmeshed in the foreign policy of the nation. Each war that India has fought, has given us an increased, but limited, military capability. This military capability has so far allowed economic development to where it stands today. But military capability cannot be developed only when a war breaks out or in a post war scenario. Like economists are best suited to address and solve economic challenges, military leaders and thinkers are best suited to address and solve military challenges. Hence, the powers that be need to recognise the strategic expertise that military leaders develop (an expertise that, unfortunately, is not imbibed by our civilian bureaucrats) and have eminent leaders from the armed forces as advisers for an autonomous Military Commission that will synergise military growth with economic growth, in consultation with the Planning Commission. A country's standing in the world order cannot only depend on economic strength. If economic strength is not backed by matching military strength, we can only create ripples which will affect no one. If India needs to truly embark on a journey to be a power to reckon with, military growth certainly cannot be left out of the loop. Only greater military power can bring about great power status for India. There is an urgent need for our educated and learned leaders to synergise efforts so as to overcome internal as well external faultlines.

A case in point is the recent refusal by Pakistan to accept direct aid from India for its flood victims. Since Pakistan sees itself as an equally capable military power, it does not feel obliged to accept aid from India. India will require having military power that gives it a position of strength. China has embarked on massive military modernisation, along with phenomenal economic growth, for the last two decades or so, despite being a nation that is not threatened by anyone. Like China has done, our policy-makers need to be convinced of the requirement for us to develop our military. Economic development will be of no use if we cannot defend it militarily, not only within the country but much beyond the geographical confines of our nation. The present time presents both a challenge as well as an opportunity for India. Only time will tell how well, we as a nation, were able to make the best of this opportunity while holistically addressing the challenges.