



Ready for Future

Defence planning should be rooted in the present



MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX Defence minister Nirjala Sitharaman at FICCI's 90th AGM

DEFENCE PREPAREDNESS ENTAILS a lot more than just having the latest armaments and technologies. Ideally, defence preparedness should be the shared responsibility of the military and the polity. The military's responsibility is the physical defence of the nation, while the polity's is to aid the military's ability to do so.

A term that is repeated in the Joint Doctrine as well as the individual doctrines of the army, navy and air force is 'strong, well-structured combat capability'. This is a succinct definition of the primary responsibility of the armed forces. Combat capability can be developed and improved when both military and civilian policies are geared towards it. With this in mind, equipping the armed forces is the foremost priority of the current administration.

Equipping the forces is secondary to the planning required for the same. Planning for the future is best done by focusing on the present and a good start has been made in this direction with the reforms in defence procurement and production policies. Decision-making continues to be conventional and is rooted more in the past than in the present. Established institutions and processes are not subject to review and

reforms are very slow in the making. Even if convention and hierarchy are accepted as integral to the defence establishment in India, economic calculations are conspicuously absent from all decision-making processes.

The debate over integrated planning, coordination and even hybrid warfare has raged on for quite some time now. Since the introduction of the revolution in military affairs (RMA) concept, the focus has shifted from the present to the future of warfare. This encompasses a change in both outlook and practice where warfare is no longer merely human, but informational. This is owing to the accelerated pace of developments in technology. While all three services acknowledge the need to prepare for future warfare which requires 'harmonious and synergistic application of land, sea and air forces', communication does not seem to be a strong suit. This is evident in the push and pull between prioritising the acquisition of new fighter aircraft for the air force, new carbines for the army and construction of new aircraft carriers and submarines for the navy. Bureaucrats and civilian personnel rely heavily on the inputs of defence service personnel for planning. The defence personnel of the three services

work in silos and inter-service cooperation is limited to conferences and co-ordinated exercises. Coordinated planning while omnipresent in discourse is absent in action.

There is no doubt that planning for the future is crucial. However, this cannot be at the expense of the present, and more importantly, cannot be done without conducting a pragmatic review of the economic resources available. An important aspect of RMA is military transformation. The four characteristics that are studied under this are force structure, modernisation, readiness and sustainability. The Indian military is undergoing some transformation, especially with regard to modernisation and readiness. A lot has been written about force structure and restructuring of the Indian military by those best equipped to comment on them. The focus of this article is the economic considerations that need to become an integral part of decision-making processes in defence.

Force modernisation, 'Make in India for Defence', indigenisation, defence production, doctrine, national security objectives and more have become buzzwords among defence policy circles in India these past few months. In light of the dialogue surrounding India's defence preparedness, it would help to take a step back and examine what are the predominant patterns in decision-making that have brought defence to its current predicament. The predicament here is the chicken and egg situation with regard to imports and indigenisation (or domestic defence production), for equipping the armed forces and ensuring that our defences are fortified, without burning a hole in the country's pocket. This ties into the readiness and sustainability aspects of the RMA theory.

Economic considerations for defence preparedness must not be limited to the traditional debate on budget allocations for defence and pay commissions. For example, the defence acquisition process involves several stages, the most problematic of which are field evaluations. If the product does not satisfy just one in a list of service qualitative requirements (SQRs), the quality



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assurance authorities are at liberty to reject the product or demand improvements. This leads to delays, or worse a re-issuance of RFPs which leads to an increase not only in opportunity costs but also an exponential rise in marginal costs. The defence market in India should confer monopsony power on the single buyer in it – the government of India. However, the government is far from being a price-setter, let alone have negotiating power in its current situation. The current institutions and hierarchies do not take these costs and the lack of negotiating power into account as they may be considered peripheral. However, if the lens of defence economics were to be applied to these processes, these costs could be significantly reduced.

The blame for the lack of equipment and delays is often put down to budget constraints. On one hand, the budget allocation for defence is not 3 per cent of GDP as most defence experts would like it to be. On the other hand, the budget allocation for defence is approximately 17 per cent of the Union Budget, second only to interest payments. This is an important number and fact to keep in mind, because as crucial as a higher defence budget may sound, decisions must be based on realistic estimates of the capital and resources available to India. The armed forces

and the bureaucracy both need to take note of this.

A review of decision-making structures, hierarchies and processes is the need of the hour. The system need not be overhauled or given a complete makeover, but weeding out inefficiencies and unnecessary protocol might help. Some changes have been made, such as enhancing the financial powers of the armed forces and empowering Vice-Chiefs to 'place orders, procure equipment and carry out civil works without seeking further approval of MoD.' However, these changes impact the daily functioning of the military and have little to do with long-term planning. These measures indicate that there is an acceptance of the need for change in decision-making patterns but leave much to be desired in the medium to long term.

It is not just the lack of integrated planning, but also the absence of a dovetailing of administrative and economic needs that leads to the armed forces being inadequately prepared and equipped. The Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) was set up for the express purpose of integrating policy, doctrine, war fighting and even procurement. The IDS' achievement of this prime objective is the topic of a different debate. However, what remains clear is that the forc-

es still lag behind in terms of working efficiently in order to save time, effort and money. All of which are required for the forces to bring themselves up to the mark. The preliminary restructuring of processes in the army has begun, with the Raksha Mantri reviewing the implementation of 99 of the 188 recommendations made by the Shekatkar Committee for rationalisation of expenditure. This kind of reform will be even more efficient when carried out with a thought to streamlining operations with other services. This harks back to the common and prime objective of India's armed forces that is the defence of the nation.

While RMA theory's force structure, modernisation and readiness aspects have been acknowledged by policy makers and defence personnel, sustainability is an aspect that remains unaddressed. This will remain the case as long as economic considerations do not become integral to decision-making. Indian armed forces need to take decisions that are right for them, in their current context, with a view to the future. After all, our defences will be better if we root decision making in present circumstances, while planning for a variety of future options. ||

(The writer is senior research associate, Pahle India Foundation)