
India's National Defence-2024 and Beyond

Deepak Kapoor

National security has been a prominent issue in the just concluded elections. In the course of intense electioneering, almost all the major parties have used it as a means to secure electoral gains. Be that as it may, the reality is that national security has not been given the importance it deserves by successive governments. No wonder, we do not have a comprehensive national security strategy document in place even 72 years after independence. However, thanks to the focus during the elections, some pertinent and relevant aspects pertaining to national defence have been raised which need to be deliberated upon by the new government on priority.

The new government has a five-year window up to 2024 in which it needs to deliver on promises made during the elections on issues of national defence. While it would be difficult to achieve tangible improvements in this timeframe, considering the long gestation periods of defence projects, nevertheless, a suitable beginning can be made and a path charted out for the future, such as the 'Make in India' project. It is, indeed, a laudable initiative and extremely beneficial for India in the long run. However, 10-15 years is the minimum period required for setting up joint ventures, obtaining technological knowhow, trial production of equipment and, finally, mass production and absorption in the Services. However, there has been limited progress on this project during the last five years. But given such a step has been taken, it calls for significant changes in the future.

General Deepak Kapoor (Retd) is former Chief of India's Army Staff.

Similarly, a reason for the long gestation period is that a number of useful recommendations on defence modernisation and reforms made by different committees from time to time have become the victims of bureaucratic apathy and manipulation. As a result, while, in some cases, the implementation has been far too delayed, in others, a diluted version has been put into effect. Still others have not ever been implemented. To add further, as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the expenditure on defence has gradually been coming down during the last decade. Today, it stands at a paltry 1.52 per cent. Increase of salaries and pensions, based on the recommendations of the Sixth and Seventh Pay Commissions, has further resulted in a corresponding reduction of the resources available for keeping the defence forces modernised and relevant. Thus, unless annual budgetary allocations are drastically revised upwards, improvements in the national defence capabilities will be subject to corresponding delays.

In view of the foregoing, it would be appropriate to first assess the prevailing security environment by the year 2024 and beyond. This would help to identify the challenges that the defence forces would be expected to overcome to meet the nation's aspirations. Thence would emerge the roadmap for achieving the desired capabilities.

India's External Security Environment

China

Over the past two decades, China has had an average annual growth rate of 8-9 per cent. In the initial period of its growth, it followed Deng Xiaoping's dictum of 'hiding capabilities and biding time'. However, with China's meteoric rise, the world is witnessing a perceptible shift as a result of its assertive and aggressive policies in its neighbourhood and beyond. Though it still claims to be 'rising peacefully', Sun Tzu's maxim of 'winning wars without firing a bullet' is being skillfully applied to impose its will on its smaller neighbours with limited resources. The declaration

of the Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) and forcible occupation of the disputed hitherto unoccupied islands like Scarborough Shoal and their conversion into military bases is indicative of the aggressive intent in dealing with Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, Taiwan and others in the South China Sea (SCS). Likewise, in the East China Sea (ECS), China has laid claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, which are part of Japan. Against India too, the Chinese stance is gradually getting more aggressive, as witnessed in case of the Doklam standoff. Non-resolution of the boundary issue, coupled with aggressive moves along the India-China border enables Beijing to keep New Delhi under pressure thereby, diverting its attention from economic growth.

It is often argued that there is ample space for both India and China to grow economically. Thus, there should be healthy competition between them for sources of raw materials and markets for the sale of finished products. However, the seeds of confrontation are inherent in any competition. When healthy competition tends to get fierce, the possibility of friction between the competing powers increases. With the strategic space being finite, the efforts by competing powers to garner a major share of it is bound to increase tensions between them. That is to suggest that in the backdrop of a festering boundary dispute, the possibility of a conflict between India and China increases manifold.

While outwardly maintaining a nonchalant stance, China is assiduously working to undermine India's growth story. Cultivating friendship with all of India's smaller neighbours, following a 'string of pearls' policy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) blocking India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) time and again, providing support to insurgencies in northeast India and developing a strong anti-India axis with Pakistan are veiled attempts to check India's progress. This, thereby, increases the possibility of a confrontation between India and China in the long run. That is, with China growing more powerful by the day, its aggressive tendencies are likely to find expression in more concrete ways in the future.

Pakistan

The friction that was generated between India and Pakistan at the time of partition in 1947 has never fully died down. While India may have moved on, Pakistan links its very survival to an anti-India stance. In view of this, an institution that has repeatedly fuelled this feeling among the average Pakistanis is the Pakistan Army. A perpetual anti-India stance has enabled the Army to maintain a stranglehold over the Pakistan polity. The Army has ruled Pakistan directly or indirectly since its creation and has dictated its foreign policy towards India. Resultantly, the government, judiciary and legislature are so weak that they can hardly withstand the Pakistan Army's dominance. In fact, it is often felt that even if the Kashmir issue was somehow resolved, the Army will invent other issues to retain an anti-India stance, thus, perpetuating its hold over the nation.

With this backdrop, the Kashmir issue is unlikely to be settled any time soon. Having failed in 1948, 1965, 1971 and the Kargil War in 1999, Pakistan's attempts at creating unrest in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) through proxy war are likely to continue. This is to suggest that a confrontation between India and Pakistan cannot be ruled out in the long run.

Collusive Threat

Since the 1960s, China and Pakistan have built a strong relationship that has been described as "higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans". With the passage of time, this relationship has only strengthened as witnessed in terms of the following: Shaksgam Valley, measuring 5,180 sq km, an area belonging to India and occupied by Pakistan, has already been ceded by the latter to China; under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has spent US\$ 60 billion to develop the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a project looked upon by Pakistan as its lifeline to economic prosperity; Gwadar port is being developed and operationalised by China with the ultimate possibility of a strong Chinese

military base to dominate the Indian Ocean; and, lastly, China today is the biggest supplier of military hardware to Pakistan.

These factors exemplify that the China-Pakistan axis is sustained basically by an anti-India stance. There are strong indications of a synchronised anti-India approach by the two during most of the interactions at international fora. This raises the possibility of a collusive military threat for India, thus, exposing India to a resultant two-front war that it may be constrained to face to defend itself.

Internal Security Environment

J&K

Pakistan's efforts to destabilise J&K by providing active support to the proxy war are likely to continue unabated. The two challenges for the Indian security forces are: firstly, to eliminate cross-border infiltration; and, secondly, to liquidate the terrorists causing death and destruction within the state. Simultaneously, there is a need for improving the governance, increasing the connectivity of the state with the rest of the country, and reducing the perceived grievances of the alienated population.

The commitment of the military in the state is likely to continue till the local police, aided by the central police forces, is in a position to restore law and order on its own. The firm stance adopted by the Centre in dealing with the separatists and overground workers, on the one hand, and exposing the channels of illegitimate funding of the insurgency, on the other, are steps in the right direction and seem to be paying dividends.

Insurgencies in the Northeastern States

With continuous efforts over a prolonged period of time, the security forces have been able to bring down the levels of insurgency in a number of states in the northeast. However, Manipur, and, to a lesser extent, Assam, are still affected but it is hoped that sustained operations will reduce the

intensity further. The greater challenge is to ensure that such insurgencies do not sprout up again. To avoid such a resurgence, better governance and development have to be combined with the continued presence of the security forces to improve the situation. Hence, the commitment of the military in the northeastern states is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

Left Wing Extremism (LWE)

Large swathes of central India are affected by LWE, a phenomenon which threatens to spread further unless checked resolutely. Lack of development, poor governance, unemployment and illiteracy are major causes responsible for this scourge. The insurgents are adept at striking and shifting across state boundaries to avoid police action. Law and order, being a state subject, the responsibility to tackle the problem rests primarily with the states. However, political alignments make meaningful inter-state and Centre coordination difficult. Of late, the situation has improved, thus, bringing in a degree of stability in an otherwise turbulent situation. However, a lot more needs to be done.

To summarise, the current external and internal security environments indicate challenging times ahead for the nation as it attempts to grow and claim its rightful place in the world order. This underscores the necessity of a relevant military capable of overcoming challenges and acting as an enabler of national growth.

In order to deal with the external-internal security matrix, in certain aspects, India's defence Services need to make significant progress by 2024 and beyond. The issues that need attention are as given below.

Jointness

Jointness implies cohesiveness among the Army, Navy and Air Force. Battlefield transparency, precision targeting, mobility, rapid concentration and dispersal of resources and excellent night fighting capability will be essential in a future battlefield. Integration of all available resources in a

seamless manner to exploit fleeting opportunities and ensure success is, therefore, of prime importance. This highlights the necessity for jointness among the three Services, the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Today, most modern militaries have moved towards integration of available resources to achieve optimum results. The US, UK, Russia and even China have instituted a system of integrated commands wherein, all the resources are placed at the disposal of a commander for accomplishing the tasks assigned by employing the right resource at the right time. However, in the case of India, jointness has suffered because of its resistance to change and its emphasis on retaining and sustaining separate Service identities. In this process, there is duplication of effort, frittering away of precious resources and less chances of success in battle.

Conceptual Framework of Higher Defence Organisation

The political authority must, first of all, lay down national objectives which would form the basis of a National Security Strategy (NSS). Unfortunately, there is no single document wherein India's national security objectives have been clearly spelt out. Rather, what exists is a series of pronouncements made by the political authority from time to time, in different contexts and circumstances, depending on the prevailing situation in the country. This caveat has thereby led to arguments, of which, most noted is George Tanham remark that "India has no strategic culture".

Having spelt out the national objectives, the political authority needs to undertake a strategic defence review which would then form the basis of the NSS. Once finalised, after incorporating the viewpoints of all stakeholders, it must be approved by the Parliament to give it the necessary sanctity for implementation. The NSS, so promulgated, would also act as a benchmark for the government of the day and Service Headquarters to work towards.

Higher Defence Management

Unlike in a number of modern countries, the exposure of our political leadership and bureaucracy to national security, warfare, military strategy, insurgencies and others is limited. Barring an odd exception, none among the political class has been exposed to military service. The bureaucratic advice available to the political class on defence and military matters is based on the limited experience a bureaucrat may have gained serving in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Consequently, decision-making at the political level tends to be flawed.

The Kargil Review Committee (KRC), set up post the Kargil conflict, in its wisdom, had recommended the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to act as a single point adviser to the government on strategic and military matters. Eighteen years down the line, the CDS is still to be appointed. Likewise, the KRC had also recommended closer integration of the MoD and Service Headquarters by inter-posting of Service officers and bureaucrats in the two organisations for improvement in decision-making. Here too, there is little to show for progress.

There is a requirement to institutionalise mechanisms involving the structured interaction of the Service Chiefs with the Prime Minister, Defence Minister and Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on a regular basis. Currently, the CCS meets more to tackle crisis situations than on an ongoing basis to review national security. The Service Chiefs are expected to join its deliberations only by invitation, which happens rarely. Furthermore, the National Security Council (NSC) which is expected to function regularly to implement the CCS directions, consequently, has also not met often, making it almost defunct. Finally, the weekly interaction among the Defence Minister, the Service Chiefs and the Defence Secretary is not formalised, its deliberations are not recorded and, what is more, it may not take place for as long as a month at times. If structured interaction takes place regularly, perhaps crisis situations will not occur or will be resolved immediately.

On aspects of national security, professional military advice must be made available to the political authority in the earliest possible timeframe. The appointment of a CDS needs to be hastened. The bureaucratic side needs to concentrate more on meeting the logistic and provisioning requirements of the Services. Strategic aspects are better handled by professionals, as is the practice in all advanced countries of the world.

Modernisation of the Services

Given India's limited defence budgets and lack of indigenous defence industrial base, the hollowness within all three Services is gradually increasing. This can have serious security consequences for the nation in the long run. China, which is gradually getting more assertive all along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has a defence budget which is almost four times that of India. Besides, the edge in conventional forces that India enjoyed over Pakistan 10 years ago is gradually diminishing.

Army

The Army has a shortage of artillery guns, air defence weapon systems and night fighting capability. The infantry has not been able to successfully push its INSAS (Infantry Soldier as a System) project so far. State-of-the-art rifles and carbines are urgently required for the frontline soldiers. The tank fleet lacks full-fledged night fighting capability, with a number of tanks reaching obsolescence levels. The mechanised infantry lacks matching mobility and night fighting capability to function side by side with the tanks. Finally, the artillery is just starting the process of state-of-the-art gun systems.

Navy

The Indian Navy has had major accidents onboard the submarines INS *Sindhurakshak* and INS *Sindhuratna*. Its project involving indigenous

production of 6 Scorpene submarines has been delayed by about five years. The INS *Arihant*, the indigenously manufactured nuclear submarine, has just been operationalised. The Navy is also looking at suitable twin engine aircraft for its aircraft carrier. In essence, its efforts at acquiring a blue water capability stand considerably delayed. This is worrisome in view of increasing footprint of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean.

Air Force

Against an operational requirement of 45 fighter squadrons, the Indian Air Force (IAF) is currently down to 32-33. The present rate of obsolescence of fighter aircraft like the MiG-21 and MiG-27 is greater than the rate of induction of new aircraft. The worry is that the IAF may be down to 25-27 squadrons in the next five years before new accretions start taking place. The indigenous Tejas has not been able to fully meet the aspirations of the IAF. The IAF is also looking out for the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS), transport aircraft and medium lift helicopters. Additionally, it needs to urgently acquire Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) systems for the defence of vital installations.

Only if the defence budget is enhanced immediately to 3 per cent and is sustained for the next 10 years, would we be in a position to develop capabilities for facing a two-front threat by 2030. It also must be clear that the process of keeping the military relevant requires continuous funding, and shortfalls cannot be made up by one-time infusion of funds at the time of a crisis. That would be a case of too little too late.

Infrastructure Development

While we have undertaken expansion of force levels to improve our defensive capability along our borders, a process started by me in 2008, unfortunately, we have not developed matching infrastructure in our forward areas to maintain and sustain those force levels. In most of the

sensitive forward areas, we are dependent on a single road axis which is invariably exposed to the vagaries of the weather and enemy action. Resultantly, our ability to logistically maintain enhanced troop levels is suspect, thus, negating the very purpose of improving force levels.

In the past two decades, the Chinese have developed excellent infrastructure in Tibet with the Gormo-Lhasa rail and fuel lines, road connectivity to forward most posts all along the Sino-Indian LAC, development of five all weather international airfields in close proximity of the LAC, and stocking and storage facilities for sustained conflict in important forward areas. As opposed to this, in the same period, we have barely completed 27 of the 73 strategic roads identified all along the LAC. Rail connectivity to forward areas still remains a pipe dream with no progress on even one of the nine rail lines so far identified for construction.

Immediate revamp of the Border Roads Development Organisation (BRDO) to undertake road construction on a war-footing, ensuring the necessary environmental clearances in the national interest from the courts and infusion of funding for this effort are essential first steps.

Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)

Importing military hardware for modernising the defence forces is an extremely expensive proposition. This problem becomes more acute with a diminishing budgetary allocation annually, thus, giving rise to 'hollowness' which can have disastrous consequences for national security. This reflects that even after 70 years of independence, despite having a huge industrial base, India has failed to develop capabilities for indigenous manufacture of military hardware.

The DRDO has not delivered on its promises. Its resources have been frittered away in non-core areas like producing organic vegetables and undertaking construction projects rather than concentrating on modernising weaponry. Resultantly, even for basic items like rifles and carbines, we have to look outside the country for expensive imports.

The DRDO needs to give an impetus to the Prime Minister's 'Make in India' initiative by developing competencies in the core areas of concern to the Services and passing on the knowhow to the indigenous private sector for mass production. Rather than 'reinventing the wheel', it could build on the transfer of technology route to produce state-of-the-art equipment for use by the Services as well as for export.

Conclusion

As India approaches 2024 and beyond, it is expected to grow at a healthy rate of 7-8 per cent annually. However, sustained growth is only possible in a stable and peaceful environment. For this, India needs a strong and relevant military to safeguard its interests. More specifically, a hostile neighbourhood further underlines the necessity for India to develop its military capabilities to defend itself. A lot needs to be done to remove the existing 'hollowness' in the defence Services and adopt concepts and practices which would ensure optimum utilisation of limited resources, on one end, and enable the Services to discharge their responsibilities in a befitting manner, on the other. This article has identified a number of important areas that need attention for improvement in the coming decade. The list is not exhaustive and a deeper analysis would identify additional aspects requiring attention.

Finally, every nation has to take care of its own national security. Dependence on others for security would be a big mistake, as history has shown to us many a time in the past. No wonder, Europe and Japan are reconsidering their dependence on the US for security afresh.

India would do well to view its security as an asset to nation-building the long run.