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Policy Brief

Defence Reforms: Why is it Critical to Bite the Proverbial Bullet?

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Summary

On August 30, 2017, the then Defence Minister, Arun Jaitley announced a series of defence reforms. The expectations are that this marks the initiation of major change in the military. This policy brief attempts to suggest six critical policy imperatives that must act as guidelines to avoid the pitfalls and obstacles that are inevitable in such an exercise.

On August 30, 2017, the then Defence Minister, Arun Jaitley announced a series of defence reforms which will result in the 'redeployment and restructuring of approximately 57,000 posts of officers/JCOs/ORs and civilians.' The reforms are aimed at 'enhancing Combat Capability & Rebalancing Defence Expenditure of the armed forces with an aim to increase the "teeth to tail ratio".' Initial approval has been given for 65 of a total of 99 recommendations pertaining to the Indian Army. This will begin with the closure of 39 military farms in a time bound manner. The reforms are expected to be completed by December 31, 2019.[1]

The political initiative to undertake the reforms, including the initial set of measures that have been announced, is a welcome move. Both enhanced combat capability and efficiency, intended to be achieved through the ongoing reforms, are worthy objectives. This policy brief will attempt to suggest critical policy imperatives that must continue to act as guidelines for the ongoing attempt at defence reforms through the process that has been described as a major change, if it is indeed envisaged as the first such exercise after independence.

Military change is defined in a number of ways. In view of the conventional (state-on-state) and sub-conventional (counterinsurgency and terrorism) challenges faced by India, it may be best defined as "an attempt at developing a significantly more effective approach to existing or future military challenges."[2] India's past experiences suggest that changes often witnessed in the conventional domain have been strategic, aimed at creating major shifts in the military's approach to war fighting. These have also manifested in the organisational domain in the form of large-scale structural realignments. An example of change in the approach to war fighting was the attempt at compellence during the mid-eighties after having followed a doctrine of offensive defence in the seventies.[3] More recently, the strategy of 'Cold Start' or 'Limited Pre-Emptive Offensive' also qualifies as such a change. Change in the organizational domain is best illustrated by the structural changes that took place immediately after the failure in the 1962 India-China war. Some of the major steps initiated in this regard included an increase in the size of the army from 5,50,000 to 8,25,000 as well as the raising of six mountain divisions and a new command headquarter.[4] The changes based on the 1975 Krishna Rao Committee report, which led to the mechanisation of the army along with strategic reorientation, is another example that comes to mind. In the sub-conventional domain, the raising of Rashtriya Rifles (RR) is an important and relatively recent example of organisational change.

Each of these examples represents a major military change. However, that does not imply that all these changes were successful innovative steps or even an example of evolutionary adaptation. The factors that ultimately determined the success or failure of each of these initiatives were: an accurate long-term strategic assessment

[1] "Ministry of Defence approves first phase of reforms in The Armed Forces", *Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Defence*, August 30, 2017, http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=170365, accessed on September 01, 2017.
[2] Vivek Chadha, *Even If Ain't Broke Yet, Do Fix It: Enhancing Effectiveness Through Military Change* (Institute For Defence Studies and Analyses, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2016), p. 149.
[3] Ali Ahmed, *India's Doctrine Puzzle: Limiting War in South Asia* (Routledge, New Delhi, 2014), p. 39.
[4] Annual Report 1964-65, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, p. 17.

that became the basis for the change; support from the political establishment to steer the change; a visionary and committed military leadership which provided professional advice; strong institutional structures that enabled implementation of the reforms; and finally, efficient follow-up action undertaken by both military commanders and successive governments. In this regard, the changes undertaken post 1962 fell short of transforming institutions that had come up short, prior to, and during the conduct of the war. A constrained national strategic vision and weak institutional structures were responsible for the failure to improve intelligence collection, collation and analysis, take up systematic capability development, and create joint training, planning and fighting institutions. To give one example, the Joint Intelligence Committee continued to remain ineffective despite being shifted to the Cabinet Secretariat.[5] The manner in which the plan for raising additional force levels was made indicated inadequate due diligence in assessing threats and capability development. This was echoed in various analyses, including Y. B. Chavan's order to undertake a more systematic assessment, Palit's assessment of the process as the then Director of Military Operations, and observations of General Taylor, Chairman of U.S. Joint Chief of Staff.[6] A mere attempt at plugging shortfalls and increasing numbers did not offset the strategic disadvantage that India was plagued by for decades. Further, India failed to build infrastructure that could support a cohesive defensive battle, and logistic establishments to facilitate faster buildup. A quick reaction capability through better heli-lift resources remained a weakness decades after the war. That the poor state of infrastructure remained a costly error of strategic foresight and implementation was acknowledged by A.K. Antony on the floor of Parliament as late as 2013.[7] These limitations have continued, occasionally being exposed when the reality of the challenge emerged in all its manifestations in the face of China's military aggressiveness at Depsang, Chumar and more recently Doklam, making change imperative. Conversely, the reforms after 1975 that revolutionised India's war waging potential, particularly in the Punjab and Rajasthan theatres, did give India a perceptible strategic edge over Pakistan in the mid-eighties. This example suggests the successful contribution of all five factors listed above. The same was also achieved through the raising, orientation, training, deployment and employment of the RR in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

Measures to enhance the combat effectiveness of the army must flow from a clear security intention outlined by the government. This, in turn, should emanate from India's threat perception or in the event of no clear and obvious threats, which would be the case with out of area contingencies, a capability that the country must possess to deter or neutralise any threat that emerges in the future. In our case, there are

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[5] K. Subrahmanyam, "Revamping Intelligence", in K. Subrahmanyam and Arthur Monteiro, *Shedding Shibboleths: India's Evolving Strategic Outlook*, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2005, p. 20.

[6] R.D. Pradhan, *Debacle to Resurgence: Y. B. Chavan, Defence Minister (1962-1966)*, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 2013, pp. 210-211, Maj. Gen D. K. Palit, *War in High Himalayas*, Lancer International, New Delhi, 1991, p. 380, Maxwell D. Taylor. " Document 348, Memorandum from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor), to Secretary of Defense McNamara", *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIX, South Asia*, Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, Washington, December 23, 1963.

[7] "China Fears India's Infra Build-up at LAC", AK Antony", *DNA*, September 7, 2013, at http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-china-fears-infra-build-up-at-lac-ak-antony-1885602 (Accessed July 9, 2015)

clearly discernible security threats and challenges that continue to adversely affect India's security. These are a result of unresolved borders and continuing inimical actions by adversaries. Given the history of four major wars fought by India and its adversaries, the country has no option but to deter a future war and, in case deterrence fails, remain prepared to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition, the security forces must build and retain the capability of protecting India's core national interests beyond its borders. These include, *inter alia*, the safety of Indians working in regions like West Asia; protection of economic and energy supply lines and assets; contribution to international responsibilities like United Nations (UN) peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations; and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions.

In addition to these external threats and responsibilities are sub-conventional challenges like terrorism and insurgency, which have necessitated the active employment of a substantially large force, both army and central police. Some of these deployments are also focused towards Pakistan that manifests itself in a variety of forms to include terrorism. Further, challenges like economic and cyber warfare go beyond the traditional realm of security. All of these necessitate the deployment of "soldiers" with different skill-sets to fight the adversary in these non-traditional domains. War, as a result, is increasingly assuming hybrid forms, and has been waged successfully by countries like Pakistan and China against India for a number of years. The threat presented by Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) and cyber attacks on security and critical infrastructure have therefore become a challenge for trained professionals fighting the adversary, often unseen and unheard by a vast majority of Indians.

This assessment implies that the nature of threats and challenges has undergone a transformation in the recent past and transcend the traditional notions of security. It also suggests that the instruments of the state required to fight the "enemy" also need to diversify, given the means and tools that an adversary like Pakistan is employing. This leads to the conclusion that India needs to reassess its threats, challenges and desired capabilities in light of this new normal of hybrid war.

The existing concept of defence is individual service centric, where each service largely plans and operates within its particular silo. Similarly, the counter terrorism approach too remains distinct to each arm of the state, with cooperation occurring at best at the functional level to achieve a basic level of cohesion. There are obvious conclusions which emerge from this reality. The first has been raised all too often; the lack of unity of effort and consequently a failure to achieve economy of effort. The lack of joint planning, joint training, and joint equipment (which includes procurement) affects both efficiency and economy. The analogy of the *Blind Men of Hindoostan* would not be out of place here, wherein, each arm of the state perceives threats and challenges in its own way. The eventual manifestation of the actual threat ultimately compels the various arms to hastily coordinate for finding a quick fix solution or "improvisation" as it is often referred to.

Further, the inherent desire to protect turf remains a stumbling block for defence reforms. The fight often tends to centre around allocation of funds and numbers of senior ranks that must at least be protected if not enlarged, rather than finding the

optimum solution for the challenge at hand. Under these circumstances, solutions are bound to be coloured and driven by parochial interests.

This is further aggravated by the impact of isolationist thinking related to the emergence of hybrid threats that manifests across traditional boundaries and demands an unprecedented level of unity of effort. Beyond conventional deterrence, the role and employment of the armed forces therefore needs a reassessment. The emergence of hybrid wars should have logically questioned the undue focus on extensive standing armies with multiple strike corps, which are unlikely to be employed as envisaged in the eighties. It should have increased our concerns about and understanding of limited wars, which now represent the maximal option in the shadow of nuclear weapons. While there have been attempts to reorient existing force levels to meet this new reality, the structure of the past continues to govern the vastly different reality of hybrid wars. Further, the fast, limited context of future wars also raises the issue of the profile of the armed forces and the equipment philosophy they have been adopting. The scale of the existing challenge at hand and the limited availability of resources have repeatedly laid bare the reality of shortages in critical areas like reserves in ammunition, special force capability development and intelligence resources. The armed forces need a structure and size which enables them to fight a faster paced, shorter and more efficient limited war. This demands a very different equipment profile, as also an efficient logistical support base. Since the funding for modernisation is likely to remain at existing levels of approximately 1.55 per cent, as a percentage of GDP, the obvious conclusion is to re-prioritise resources towards the challenges actually being faced. This includes limited wars in the conventional domain, terrorism, and non-traditional security challenges like HADR and cyber attacks.

When this reality is transposed upon the reforms being effected, it indicates the direction that security planning needs to take. First, even as the enhancement of the teeth to tail ratio remains critical, its implementation without addressing the simultaneous challenge of services functioning in silos will yield only limited benefits. The decision to cut down numbers must be linked with synergised efficiencies amongst the Ministry of Defence (MoD), affiliated Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the three services.

Second, the streamlining of logistics initiated will remain sub-optimal unless the exercise is undertaken as a tri-service, ordnance factory and quality assurance related endeavour. Even as some areas will continue to remain distinct, greater efficiencies and economy should be created through greater cohesion. The cutting down of numbers from amongst the logistic support elements has to be accompanied by joint services establishments to achieve economies of scale. Therefore, it should be accompanied by the theaterisation of armed forces.

Third, the ongoing reforms cannot be limited to the three services alone. It must also include the MoD as well as the entire national security architecture with a view to building an overarching organisation that can cohesively address the challenge of hybrid wars. To that end, one of the most critical strategic tools that remain lacking is a Special Forces command, which can undertake tasks beyond the tactical domain. This becomes imperative in an environment where punitive, clinical,

offensive actions may need to be undertaken without resorting to a large-scale deployment of forces in conventional mode. Further, this capability cannot be restricted to the three services alone, as the task of creating intelligence assets in potential combat zones and providing high quality inputs remains critical to the success of special forces. The emergence of threats in cyber and space, should therefore become the basis for creation of a cyber and space commands, with a capability of both defensive and offensive actions. This too is a field which relates to the larger concept of security, rather than the one represented by the three services alone.

Fourth, as has been reiterated by a number of analysts in the past, reforms must be holistic and homogenous.[8] Any attempt at piecemeal implementation is unlikely to yield the desired benefits and dividends. Even if the approach to reforms is sequential, the decision to undertake them fully in phases is a course that will allow flexibility of implementation and desirable readjustment.

Fifth, past experience with defence reforms has clearly indicated that success has only been achieved when reforms benefit from the professional advice of the services and are backed by the willingness of the political establishment to enforce implementation. The existing resistance within the services and the civilian bureaucracy is unlikely to allow reforms that affect their status and the size of their establishments. It is for the political leadership to take the onus and responsibility of leading such an effort. It is also for political leaders to outline national security concerns and envisaged capabilities, for which the security agencies must thereafter provide a blueprint. Any exercise in reform in the absence of this critical datum is likely to result in limited incremental steps and an opportunity lost.

Sixth, the success of defence reforms hinges on the availability of financial resources. Unlike the enhanced resources made available for reforms after the 1962 war and while implementing the 1975 committee recommendations through the eighties, the allocation is likely to remain around the existing levels.[9] Therefore, the scope and size of reforms must be tailored to the needs of specific modernisation targets, even if these are achieved sequentially rather than concurrently. As an illustration, if limited wars and combating terrorism in J&K are identified as priority areas, the focus must be on the same, rather than thinly spreading precious and limited resources across the army. The absence of guidelines outlining such priorities will result in piecemeal procurement of part capability in a variety of domains, which will fail to create enhanced combat effectiveness.

These six guidelines must become the basis for undertaking major structural changes of the kind that has been visualised. While pushing through the ongoing reforms, the government must assess the pitfalls of similar reforms in the past. If this is done, it is likely to find that the process has often been constrained by the

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[8] Lt. Gen. P. C. Katoch, "Peacemeal Army Reforms Demonstrate Lack of Strategic Sense", *The Citizen*, August 31, 2017, http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/NewsDetail/index/1/11607/Piecemeal-Army-Reforms-Demonstrate-Lack-of-Strategic-Sense, (Accessed September 8, 2017)

[9] Laxman Kumar Behera, India's Defence Budget 2017-18: An Analysis, February 3, 2017, *IDSA*, http://idsa.in/system/files/issuebrief/ib_india-defence-budget-2017-18_lkbehera_030217.pdf (Accessed September 8, 2017)

temptation to address limited peripheral issues, even as big core changes were deferred for reasons like lack of political consensus. Decisions like GST and the push for triple talaq have proved beyond doubt that the government has the will and desire to bring about paradigm shifts that challenge outdated ideas. The opportunity to transform the national security structure does not present itself often. The government should take up for implementation the recommendations that have been successively made by the Arun Singh, Kargil Review and Naresh Chandra Committees. It would also be useful to compare them with all 188 recommendations of the Shekatkar committee and evaluate what has been implemented so far. It is equally important to assess what remains pending for implementation because the seeds of major military change might just be found amongst recommendations that are yet to be taken up for implementation. The statement of the Raksha Mantri alluded to this very transformation in the form of a major military change in his statement of August 30, 2017. And a major change it must be for India to successfully address the challenge of ongoing and future hybrid wars.

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