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Land Warfare in the Indian Context

Time for a Transformative Shift?

*Vivek Chadha**

The Indian Army is in the process of a transformative effort, envisaging changes not only at the apex level, within the Army Headquarters, but also in the field, with the concept of Integrated Battle Groups likely to be implemented soon. The past record of major changes within the army suggests an incremental approach, and also disconnect between doctrinal thought and restructuring. The only exception were the changes post the 1975 military reforms. With the Land Warfare Doctrine suggesting the future direction of the army's war fighting priorities, can the ongoing effort at transformation succeed? This will be influenced by the ability to adapt to the changing character of war and by re-prioritising change in light of budgetary realities that are likely to remain consistent into the future. Most importantly, even as structures are created, it is the organisational culture that must drive the transformation for real change to happen.

Wars often become historical landmarks, which define the course of transformative endeavours of armies across the world. These periods, characterised by the clash of wills, lead to introspection on the basis of real-life events, in contrast with war games and exercises with troops. While the latter comes closest to simulating battlefield conditions, it rarely, if at all, succeeds in replacing reality.

India's last experience of land warfare in a conventional military sphere emerges from the Kargil conflict fought in 1999, albeit over a limited geographical area across the Line of Control (LoC), demarcated

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in the immediate aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pak War. This article picks up the threads of India's attempts at transforming its land warfare capabilities since the Kargil conflict of 1999, which proved to be a major cause for military introspection. While this attempt was not as well articulated in Pakistan, India undertook a formal, transparent and wide-ranging endeavour to better understand the limitations that had been exposed in no uncertain terms.

The article argues that the course of succeeding modernisation attempts, aimed at enhancing India's land warfare capabilities, has largely been evolutionary in nature. This was especially the case with existing force structures and to an extent, the doctrinal thought as well. Attempts at breaking away from this trend, despite possibly the best intentions, did not play out as intended, as will be analysed here. This was until the army articulated its more recent attempt at transforming itself. While the impact of the same can only be seen in the future, the intent to break from the mould is evident. This article, while exploring past attempts at transformation, focuses on the evolutionary character of change, with a sharp focus on the ongoing attempts at what might well prove to become a revolutionary change for the Indian Army—though only if the army is successful in walking the thin line between limited resources and the changing character of war.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Prior to the attempt aimed at building India's land forces post-Kargil, there were at least two major endeavours at restructuring the army. The first restructuring was a reaction to the defeat of 1962, which saw the force level of the army increase from 5.5 lakh to 8.25 lakh.¹ This included the raising of six divisions, which initially included four mountain divisions. A new command headquarter was created, focused towards the northern borders. These changes did not necessarily give India the edge, primarily because of the limitations of doctrinal development which could have better employed the available resources. In essence, India's approach towards China remained overly defensive and tentative, despite capability development over the years.²

The next major transformative step was initiated in 1975, with the Krishna Rao Committee recommending sweeping changes in the structure of the army.³ The recommendations of the Committee were implemented and taken to their logical conclusion through large-scale mechanisation of the army. This included the raising of Reorganised

Army Plains Infantry Division (RAPID), the aviation corps, induction of Bofors guns and the upscaling of mechanised infantry as an independent corps, thereby strengthening the manoeuvre warfare concepts of the army. These changes were accompanied by a shift in doctrinal principles as well. This included the concept of compellence and an offensive strategy, which was witnessed during the 1980s, especially in relation to Pakistan.⁴

The euphoria of the 1980s soon subsided when the conventional superiority on the western borders was replaced by the realities of proxy war in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), forcing the involvement of large numbers from within the army for countering terrorism. This involvement with terrorism was further aggravated by the induction of the army into Sri Lanka, as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). The contradictory requirement of maintaining conventional edge against India's envisaged adversaries and facing the reality of everyday terrorism not only divided the attention of the army, it also impinged upon scarce resources. The adverse effects of this reality were felt the most in light of India's economic restructuring commencing in the early 1990s. This brought with it a period of severe austerity measures within the government, and the army was no exception to it. The state of Indian Army's equipment and resources must therefore be seen in this light on the eve of the Kargil conflict.

THE KARGIL CONFLICT AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Kargil conflict exposed the poor state of equipment of the army and brought it to public notice. When asked about the severe shortages, General Malik's statement of 23 June 1999, while briefing a journalist, summed it all: 'We shall fight with whatever we have.'⁵ Malik reinforced this state of affairs when he later wrote:

In 1997–98, the Army budget was Rs 16,384 crore. After accounting for maintenance, works (i.e. construction of accommodation, storage and connected facilities) and contractual liabilities, only Rs 230 crore or 1.4 per cent was available for funding modernization schemes. All the years of neglect had had a serious negative impact on making up deficiencies and led to setbacks for the modernization of the armed forces.⁶

It was also realised in the immediate aftermath of the conflict that the command and control of 15 Corps was overstretched. Its areas of

jurisdiction included the Kashmir Valley, LoC north of the Pir Panjal with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) against China in J&K, and made coordination a challenge. The inadequacy of reserves in the Leh region also became apparent. This led to the raising of 14 Corps and retention of 8 Mountain Division in the area.⁷

The limitations of India's conventional military deterrence were reinforced by an impression of India's passivity in the face of provocations by Pakistan. India's reactions to grave terror strikes not only reinforced it during the 1990s, but also after the 2001 Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai terrorist strike. This led to the emergence of a limited war doctrine, which was released in 2004.⁸ It was termed the 'Cold Start' doctrine within media circles, given the pre-emptive nature of options that had been included in the face of provocations of the kind India had repeatedly faced. This was followed by the creation of 9 Corps and South Western Command to improve command and control over an extended frontage.⁹

However, despite raising these new formations and the emergence of a 'proactive' doctrine, the inability, or the lack of willingness, to put the doctrine into practice after the Mumbai terror strikes in 2008 only reinforced what had been repeated often. India's strategic patience had transformed into strategic passivity in the face of even grave provocations. The 'soft state' narrative was merely reinforced.¹⁰

Even as India learnt to manage Pakistan's threat of terrorism, the scope and scale of China's growing military influence and its unpredictable fallout loomed on the horizon. Despite not a shot having been fired along the borders since 1967, the sudden enhancement in China's capability became difficult to ignore in New Delhi. Besides George Fernandes's indication of China as the principal threat and Vajpayee's leaked letter to Clinton yet again hinting at the China angle, consensus was emerging that India needed to pay greater attention to its northern borders.

The impact of this renewed focus led to an increase in force levels along the borders with China. Not only did the army attempt to fill the existing gaps by raising additional divisions, there was also an attempt to enhance the capability to undertake a counterstrike in case India was forced into a conflictual situation.¹¹

An assessment of the structural changes that took place over more than five decades, some of which were also accompanied by doctrinal reorientation, makes it evident that with the exception of the changes post-1975, most others were evolutionary in nature and remained limited

primarily to structural adjustments. The changes post-1962, which led to the raising of mountain divisions, had a limited strategic impact since their orientation remained defensive, given the doctrines that accompanied it. As a result, despite a substantial increase in the size of the army, the accretions did not substantially change the military balance against China. Similarly, after the Kargil conflict, the additional formations that were raised succeeded only partially in changing the status quo. While these formations enhanced India's deterrence capability against China, it did not reduce terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Also, these accretions came at an extra financial cost which, given the constraints of the defence budget, threatened to further eat into future modernisation plans.

This renewed the challenge of retaining and building capability on four fronts. First, ensure offensive deterrence against Pakistan and defensive deterrence against China. Second, contribute meaningfully towards countering external terrorism emanating from Pakistan. Third, change the existing balance between the revenue and capital component of the army. Four, simultaneously improve the human resource satisfaction levels within the army.

THE VISION FOR REFORMS

The reforms envisaged by the army, during the last decade, aimed at not only enhancing combat effectiveness and efficiency, but also simultaneously addressing the resource–modernisation gap. The latter presented the requirement for a delicate balance between the need to man the northern and western disputed borders with China and Pakistan, which is a manpower-intensive requirement, and also, simultaneously, modernise the army's fast-aging warfighting machine. This placed the army in a catch-22 situation. The size of the army did not leave enough resources for modernisation. Conversely, an increase in capital outlay needed the army to reduce its revenue expenditure, a major percentage of which is spent on supporting its manpower. The direction was clear. While this reality had been troubling the army for long, the first direct, open and clear direction that emanated from the political leadership was in 2015, during the Combined Commanders Conference. The recommendation centred around the need to reduce manpower-intensive structuring and simultaneously, employing technology to overcome existing challenges. Prime Minister Modi, addressing senior commanders of the army, navy and air force, said:

At a time when major powers are reducing their forces and rely more on technology, we are still constantly seeking to expand the size of our forces. Modernisation and expansion of forces at the same time is a difficult and unnecessary goal. We need forces that are agile, mobile and driven by technology, not just human valour. We need capabilities to win swift wars, for we will not have the luxury of long drawn battles. We must re-examine our assumptions that keep massive funds locked up in inventories.¹²

The other element that the reforms aimed to address was the very character of war, which had been undergoing a discernible shift over the last few decades. This indicated the possibility of major wars, especially between major powers, receding. It also indicated a change in the instrumentalities likely to be employed by countries to achieve their political ends. The Prime Minister said:

...beyond the immediate, we are facing a future where security challenges will be less predictable; situations will evolve and change swiftly; and, technological changes will make responses more difficult to keep pace with. The threats may be known, but the enemy may be invisible. Domination of cyber space will become as critical as that of land, air and sea. Full scale wars may become rare, but force will remain an instrument of deterrence and influencing behaviour, and the duration of conflicts will be shorter.¹³

The task was therefore cut out for the armed forces, and specially so for the army, which faced the most obvious challenge in terms of its revenue and capital expenditure disbalance.

UNFOLDING TRANSFORMATION

The first set of reforms, approved in 2019, aim at restructuring the Army Headquarters (AHQ). This is being undertaken based on three fundamental objectives to include: synergy of action, speed of decisions, and rationalisation of manpower.

Structures and sub-structures, in general, tend to operate within watertight compartments. Bureaucracies, military and otherwise, are no exception to this tendency. This unsurprising characteristic adversely affects operational efficiency. The tendency to share information only through individual verticals and adherence to strict departmental channels leads to duplication of work as well as decision making in isolation. This, in turn, becomes an impediment in achieving synergy,

leads to slower decision making and the repetitive nature of work wastes manpower resources. The reforms initiated within the AHQ aim to overcome these limitations partially by restructuring in-house. It is by no means a comprehensive overhaul, which would include all three services and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) as well.

According to inputs put out in public domain, this is likely to cut the number of officers by a substantial figure of 229, which is approximately 20 per cent of the total officers posted at AHQ.¹⁴ This would make them available to field formations, which are involved with operational responsibilities and often remain short on numbers, especially at junior ranks.

The compartmentalisation referred to earlier is also being addressed at a number of critical levels. The existing structures have suffered from a degree of information and implementation gaps between military operations, intelligence, strategic planning and operational logistics. The reforms, in a bid to synergise these, have brought all four under a Deputy Chief (Planning and Strategy), a senior Lieutenant General rank officer.¹⁵

Information operations, which were looked after by a Major General rank officer, given its increasing importance, are likely to be upgraded to the rank of Lieutenant General. In a bid to enhance cohesion, separate branches in operations and intelligence directorates are likely to be brought together under an information warfare (IW) wing.¹⁶

Similarly, procurements, both revenue and capital, have presented a major challenge for the army, with delays often adversely affecting operational effectiveness. In a bid to enhance efficiency, all revenue and capital procurements are proposed to be brought under a Deputy Chief (Capability Development and Sustenance), thereby creating a single point of contact for the critical responsibility. The Master General Ordnance (MGO) will probably be brought under this vertical to ensure better coordination and implementation of logistics for the army.

An attempt is also being made to better integrate the Rashtriya Rifles into the decision-making hierarchy by placing a Major General to head it and locate him under Headquarters Northern Command for closer integration and synergy of action.¹⁷

CHANGES IN THE FIELD

The changes envisaged are not restricted to the headquarters alone. These are being driven by the changing character of war. This includes major wars becoming less likely, as also the concept of employing large

formations for deep objectives inside the enemy territory, as was planned in the past, a rare possibility. Conversely, the nature of provocations that could lead to the employment of force, which includes a major terrorist strike at a sensitive national target, demands the need to react fast, gain a positional advantage, degrade enemy military hardware, and, as a result, increase the cost of employing terrorism as an instrument of state policy. This entails restructuring the armed forces in a way that allows more flexibility and speed of operation. The envisaged concept of integrated battle groups (IBGs) is a step possibly in the pursuit of this intended objective. Even if deterrence remains the primary objective of a standing army, it is felt that this structure, which is capable of delivering punishment to an adversary more effectively, might be a better option than the existing organisational structures, which have proved to be slow, laborious and inefficient while mobilising and being put into combat.

The concept also plans to remove one level in the hierarchy by placing IBGs directly under corps headquarters, thereby removing the divisional headquarter which has traditionally been the intermediary controlling agency. The support and logistic resources with the division would now instead be with IBGs, which would be self-contained for their operational responsibilities.¹⁸ These IBGs will be commanded by Major Generals, which will also contribute to the army's attempt at rationalising the rank structure. This will create more appointments in higher ranks, especially Major General, which in turn will enhance human resource satisfaction levels. However, its impact on operational efficiency can only be judged over time as the system matures post implementation.

These changes in field formations have been put through a test bed based on exercises, which have validated the feasibility of the concept, prior to its implementation.¹⁹ Simultaneously, in a bid to hasten the speed and time needed to react to contingencies, certain formations have been located closer to the areas they intend to operate in.²⁰

The army is also in the process of cutting down on structures that are no longer seen as critical for the efficient functioning of the organisation. While some like the military farms will be done away with, others will be replaced by outsourced options, as has been proposed in the case of base workshops dealing with repair of vehicles and equipment.

The numbers will finally come in when we finish with our test beds. The figure you mention, that will depend on how many test beds finally succeed. So you know, the desirable end state is that (over 100,000), but whether we'll reach there, I don't know. If all our test

beds succeed, then we are looking at this figure (150,000). But there is also a requirement of new raisings. So while we are saving, some of it will be pushed back into new raisings. Finally, the figure could be two-third of this.²¹

In the future, the possibility of restructuring of commands is also being discussed, which could lead to lesser number of army commands facing a common adversary, thereby, yet again, leading to better coordination of reactions, cohesion within force structures and possibly even scope for integration between the three services.

DOCTRINAL SHIFTS

Structural changes do not take place in isolation. These must be guided by a doctrine, which becomes the guideline for these structures to follow and implement. Even as structural changes in the army are being debated, discussed and tested, the 'Land Warfare Doctrine' rightly preceded it, with the release of a public document in December 2018.²² The doctrine is a candid, clear and concise document that identifies the priorities of land forces across different borders. It also recognises the changing character of war, which becomes the basis for the thought process outlined.

It is important to note that even as the doctrine suggests the presence of a 'multi-front scenario in all dimensions', it highlights the need to 'prioritise options based on our capabilities'.²³ This is a recognition of the scope of the challenge and yet the need to balance the inter-se demands on the army. The dimensions are further identified in the 'non-contact domain' as well, in a bid to prepare for a 'full spectrum war'. Interestingly, the doctrine describes the future conflict scenario as a 'Grey Zone', where competition will take place in neither war nor peacetime conditions. These wars have been described as 'hybrid' in nature, which is a blend of conventional and unconventional, with 'focus increasingly shifting to multi domain warfare varying from non-contact to contact warfare'.²⁴ The employment of technology to undertake 'techno-centric combat' is visualised as the way forward to create greater efficiency. In doing so, there is emphasis on building the IW domain to include cyberwarfare, electronic warfare and psychological warfare capabilities. Interestingly, this is further expanded by the need to prepare for space warfare and enhance Special Forces and force projection capabilities.²⁵

The doctrine does not rule out the need for a conventional war, despite the adversary attempting to squeeze out the space for the same.

Its utility as an instrument of deterrence and 'punitive responses against state sponsored proxy war' remains relevant.

The approach taken by the doctrine in relation to both borders is distinct. Along the LAC, the army plans to manage the frequent transgressions to its advantage. It aims to limit escalation, along with simultaneous preparations for such an eventuality. On the other hand, along the LoC, the orientation is towards enhancing punitive strike options in greater depth and with improved effectiveness. The recent attempts at striking against Pakistani terror camps in 2016 and the air strike at Balakot in 2019 can be seen in this context.

The core focus of the 'Land Warfare Doctrine' remains on war prevention through deterrence. The methodology for the same along the border with China stresses on the need for faster mobilisation, a multi-tiered response and being self-contained to fight isolated battles. The rapid application of the strike elements is also underlined.

In contrast to the force-centric application in the north, a space-centric option finds favour along the western border. The aim remains the destruction of the centre of gravity of the adversary and 'securing spatial gains'. The employment of IBGs is clearly spelled out in the doctrine to ensure greater flexibility of operations.

The doctrine, noticeably, clarifies the intention to enhance its capability to 'address the challenges of non-contact domains of conflict [namely] cyber, space and information as a component of our strategy for non contact warfare.' This is likely to see the army 'prosecute operations with designated forces, equipped and mandated to effect attacks/retaliation in the Information Warfare (IW) domain.'²⁶

The doctrine also provides an indicator of the direction of future restructuring of the army. It seeks to create 'agile, mobile and technology driven forces, operating in synergy with the other services.' Simultaneously, keeping the resource limitations in mind, it divides acquisitions into 'op critical, op essential and op advantageous requirements.'²⁷ The need to create theaterisation of assets, both inter and intra-service, further seeks to enhance synergies of structures.²⁸

ANALYSIS OF TRANSFORMATIVE ATTEMPTS OF THE ARMY

The analysis of the Prime Minister's broad strategic and structural guidelines, given during 2014 and 2015, outlines both the challenges and direction the armed forces were required to take. This seems to be reinforced by the 'Land Warfare Doctrine' of the Indian Army. More

recently, the structural changes that are being witnessed further suggest a move in the same direction. However, is this a fundamental enough shift to overcome the challenge of limited resources, combined with the changing character of war? This question is likely to test the success or otherwise of the shifts that are underway. In this context, it would be best to put in perspective the reality and implication of limited resources. The interim budget for the year 2019–20 made the reality of the fiscal situation clear, especially for the army. The revenue expenditure for the army was pegged at Rs 1,41,501 crore and the capital at Rs 29,522 crore, (including Directorate General Quality Assurance, Military Farms, Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme and National Cadet Corps). In terms of percentage, it amounted to 83 per cent revenue and a mere 17 per cent capital.²⁹ Further, the growth in capital budget barely offsets the inflationary trends, which limits the scope for major acquisitions in future.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence for the year 2017–18 reported:

The Committee has been apprised by the representatives of the Army that any modern Armed Forces should have one-third of its equipment in the vintage category, one-third in the current category and one-third in the state of art. As far as the Army is concerned, 68 per cent of the equipment is in the vintage category, with just about 24 per cent in the current and eight per cent in the state of art category.³⁰

Given this state of equipment, there is clearly a case for meeting the requirements of fresh procurements, which in turn would imply additional allocation of capital funds. However, given the approximate increase in defence expenditure ranging between 7–8 per cent annually, there is little scope for a major increase in defence budget, both in terms of revenue and capital. The same is borne out by successive budgets over the years.

The ongoing reforms are an attempt at resolving the serious resource–capability contradiction that afflicts the army. However, the assessment that has been carried out in the article suggests that though the saving that might accrue from cutting down existing numbers will certainly add to the capital budget allocation, it may still not be enough to fill existing voids and continue with the pace of increasing national ambitions and desired capabilities.

The solution, therefore, ultimately lies in either increasing the defence budget—at least for a certain period to jump-start the capability-building process, prior to flattening it to a lower allocation thereafter—or prioritising the desirable objectives and outcomes that the army is required to deliver on. Any attempt at retaining the scope of responsibility, even as the resource allocation remains virtually static, will eventually lead to a structure that may seem substantial but is bound to be afflicted by growing capability voids.

The present exercise is a bold step at rethinking the status quo. However, it may prove to be inadequate in case this introspection remains limited to the army's internal structures alone, that is, without joint structures and integration within the MoD simultaneously accompany the change. Perhaps even more important than the structures is the process of integration of thought process, which is not necessarily bound by structures. Since this is related more to organisational culture rather than organisational structures, it might well prove to be a greater challenge for the army, the armed forces, and the defence and security management structure of the country.

The Prime Minister's guidelines and the 'Land Warfare Doctrine' both allude to the changing character of war. The challenge for the Indian Army today remains the ability to balance between creating the requisite deterrence capability needed against Pakistan and China and a simultaneous ability to defend against other constituents of hybrid warfare aimed at destabilising the country, as witnessed in J&K. Simultaneously, the inter-se priority of resource allocation, based on the shift in the character of war, also becomes equally imperative. The balance between capability development and keeping resources locked in, therefore, assumes significance.

Human resource management is a critical imperative in any organisation. It is all the more relevant in the armed forces where soldiers need to remain ready for extreme sacrifices. The attempt of the army to enhance the satisfaction levels through improved avenues of promotion and creating a degree of equivalence with other organs of the government can also be seen in this regard. While this remains an important human resource management factor, its impact on operational efficiency and effectiveness should be the primary guiding factor prior to implementation. This is also equally relevant for creation of additional or alternative organisational structures, with a different manning pattern in terms of rank structures.

The army faces an increasingly critical test of retaining its operational efficiency and enhancing its capability in the face of resource limitations. The ongoing transformative initiative attempts to address this challenge. The army definitely deserves credit for challenging the status quo—an initiative that most uniformed organisations find difficult to undertake. However, the success of this venture depends not only upon the ability to overcome existing stakeholders and structures that have been cemented in their comfort zone, but also retaining operational effectiveness above all the other short-term benefits that such a shake-up might provide. Finally, if the future is indeed of hybrid challenges, then no organisation can afford to take on reforms individually, irrespective of its efficiency or capability. The future of the army's transformation also lies in its deeper integration with other armed forces, the MoD and organs of the state; and this might prove to be a far greater challenge in terms of the desired vision and its implementation.

NOTES

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