Thinking Change in the Armed Forces

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History is replete with examples of radical, modest and even failed transformations, thus revealing the fact that the armed forces are intrinsically not flexible enough to accept transformational changes. The prime drivers for change have been the emerging nature of conflict, and the development of cutting edge technologies for war fighting. It is a well known fact that introduction of new ideas and technologies usher in new dynamics and constraints, thus necessitating complementary changes in structures, policies, procedures and practices. New ideas can be intrinsically nebulous and unproven - implying undertaking organisational change - without knowing where it is headed. This necessitates an open ended transformational model for absorption of new ideas and technologies, while in the interim organisations continue to exploit old and proven methods.

Backdrop

Militaries in recent decades have seen a quantum change in the way they equip, train, plan and organise for war. The prime drivers for change have been the emerging nature of conflict, and the development and fielding of cutting edge technologies for war fighting. It is a well known fact that introduction of new ideas and technologies usher in their own dynamics and constraints, thus necessitating complementary changes in military structures, policies, procedures and practices. On other hand, militaries are also known to promote standardisation and rigidity in thought and action, and rightly to hedge against uncertainties of war and deleterious consequences of uncoordinated military action. Incidentally, the very nature of change militates against the manner in which armies are organised or structured for war. Shedding of old ideas and practices is often inhibited by those very organisational elements within the military that are presumed to be the prime drivers for change. The issue gets even more complex when the change is defined in context of existing ways for waging war and, this predicament is best explained by two eminent scholars, Adam N. Stulberg and Michael D. Salomone in their work titled, `Managing Defense Transformation: Agency, Culture and Service Change'. This commentary draws heavily on their views to examine some theoretical constructs that identify some broad yet plausible approaches for thinking change in the Indian armed forces.

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Defining Change

Stulberg and Salomone define military transformation as "a dynamic process of translating vague organisational visions and objectives into viable goals, strategies and structures", by creating synergies in doctrines and concepts at the organisational level, that far exceed the advantage of superficial changes and technological infusion. New ideas can be intrinsically nebulous and unproven - implying undertaking organisational change - without knowing where it is headed. This necessitates an open ended transformational model for absorption of new ideas and technologies, while in the interim organisations continue to exploit old and proven methods. Military transformation therefore calls for a qualitative change in the organisational strategies by balancing the existing and in vogue philosophies with new ideas and technologies. The crux of military transformation lies in fostering and nurturing change, importantly by causing corresponding shifts in military thinking, procedures, practices and processes. For any meaningful military transformation to take place there is a need to create and sustain the momentum of reforms. This entails creation of organisational structures that truly enable centralised planning through detailed planning and a flexible decision making process. Experimentation and validation of new ideas and technologies are equally important for any successful military transformation to take place.

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Institutionalising Change

In modern times, major militaries across the world seem to be grappling with this idea of change. How do we conceptualise change is an issue that has bothered many militaries in the world, and raises several questions in our context as well. How do militaries frame realistic agendas for large scale organisational transformation is yet another important question? And finally, and most important is the fact, to ascertain as to what could be the key challenges and pitfalls of the transformational strategy are other issues that would have to be addressed in the longer run. Few western scholars believe that the traditional organisational theory no longer dominates the modern military thinking and, as far as the change strategies are concerned, the focus is clearly shifting to more realistic questions of "why, what and how" of change by offering alternative explanations and models for military transformation. New theories ascribe the propensity for change to "structural" or "material" stimuli as against the "socially constructed patterns" posited under the organisational behaviour approach. Here, two broad organisational transformation approaches namely the "outside-in" and "inside-out" as enunciated by Stulberg

and Salomone towards institutionalising change in modern militaries are discussed.

The "outside-in" approach focuses on "structural realism" and locates the impetus for change in the competitive security environment in the immediate neighbourhood. Military organisations are expected to respond to the strategic and technological environment, and failure to do so could lead to grave consequences. In fact, the strategic and technological imperatives are the prime movers for change, and lack of cohesion between the two, could act as a drag towards achieving the laid down transformational goals and objectives. It is further argued that the proclivity for military innovation is determined by the social character of the nation and in particular evolving relationship between the civil and military societies. In that sense, a "divisive or discordant society" can limit the scope and objectives of military transformation. Rigid hierarchy amongst military organisations is yet another factor. This is known to aggravate institutional stasis and, while there may be a strong organisational desire, it is just that the right triggers for change may not be found. Here, the central importance of the political leadership to draw rationale linkages between the strategic and doctrinal imperatives for institutionalising change assumes importance. This could also enable effective political oversight and institutional guidance to push the required agenda for change. In other words, the "outside-in" approach focuses on the external stimulants for propelling military change, and does not address the connection between the "internal organisational dialogue and preferences" to introduction of new ideas and technologies.

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The "inside-out" approach focuses on intrinsic organisational characteristics to promote change and the means to translate them into tangible transformational tasks. One such school attributes military change to "material incentives" and / or "dynamic shifts in power sharing" structures within an organisation. It believes that innovation is often achieved by a "small yet powerful group of actors" that are integrally linked to the evolution of any organisation. Creation of "new decision making communities" by embedding officers positively inclined towards change can help kick start a viable transformational process. Another school of thought assigns substantial weight to the prevailing "organisational or cultural biases" within uniformed organisations to promote transformation. Here, the prospect for change hinges upon the "experience of military professionals" or "reform templates socialised over a period of time" within the organisation. This rationale posits that under favourable conditions militaries are capable of re-defining their organisational objectives through this community of forward thinking military

professionals. The crux of transformation in said approach is about creating a credible knowledge base within the military organisation to enable and manage large scale transformations.

Implementing Change

Admiral Cebrowski, the prime architect for organisational transformation under the leadership of Donald Rumsfield is often attributed the credit for institutionalising the process of change in the US Armed Forces. He quite early recognised the danger of change becoming "simply a slogan" and, therefore, emphasised the need to view change as a driver for "organisational efficiency" and "increased military effectiveness". Most importantly, he identified the key inhibitors and stimulants to change, which could possibly be applied to militaries contemplating large scale transformation. The fundamental barriers to change as identified by Admiral Cebrowski were essentially the "fear of failure", "size and uniformity" and "executive-military-contractual stasis". Each impeding factor can be discussed in context of its organisational impact and implications.

> Firstly, military institutions are generally cautious by nature, since "risk of failure" can carry immense organisational and hierarchical repercussions. Some risks could be far beyond the control of individuals or agencies involved and hence, the tendency to hold a strong bias against any precipitous transformational agendas. Also, the technological changes in the domain of war fighting can be so dramatic and dynamic, that it can heighten organisational fear for any meaningful change to take place, and thus limit the scope, rate and depth of transformation in the militaries.

> Secondly, the "size and spread" of military organisations makes change a costly proposition. The explicit need to maintain uniformity in a large and diverse organisation could be equally difficult. Large scale or simultaneous structural changes can cause undue organisational turbulence and hence, the temptation to limit the scope of change amongst the military hierarchies.

> Thirdly, the transformational process can sometimes also be exacerbated by the "triangle of stasis", comprising the executive, military establishment and defence contractors. The three legs of the triangle can have different reasons for imposing caution on the transformational agenda and, if these are not well balanced, the desired initiatives for change may never take off. Admiral Cebrowski emphasises that the `executive' holds the key to bring in large scale military transformations and, often may not be interested in the process, since it may jeopardise the departmental ability to exercise

authority in mandated policy areas of the government.

Since serious change in the military is often impeded by the above cited organisational mindsets and fixations, Admiral Cebrowski stressed the need to change the `vocabulary and imagery' of the commanders and staff in the armed forces. This, in his view, could be the best way of guiding large scale and turbulent military transformations. In this context, he emphasised the importance of six stimulants for propelling change in the armed forces.

Firstly, a shift in the "vocabulary and imagery" of the armed forces is a must, or in other words, he tries to postulate a theory that cognitive flows from "language" and "pictures" are most effective in transferring military knowledge and building a collaborative effort towards a meaningful transformational process.

Secondly, he emphasised for the vocabulary and imagery to change, there is a need to "teach change" in a top down fashion. In other words, there is a need to iterate the transformational goals and objectives to the military chain of command that seek to alter the long standing traditions, assumptions and processes prevalent in the armed forces. This brings in the importance of wider military education. Between "military training" and "military education" there is a thin line to distinguish. While "military training" focuses largely on the ability of military organisations and individuals to perform specific operational or tactical tasks and functions efficiently and effectively, focus on "military education" particularly enhances the length and breadth of professional military knowledge, reasoning abilities, interpretation on diverse strategic perspectives, innovative thinking and complex problem solving. In his view, emphasis on military education can significantly contribute to "teaching change" and the overall military transformational process.

Thirdly, it is important to "spiral change" through small but incremental steps based on "build a little, test a little, build a little" concept rather than the traditional approach of full definition of the change problem, and then trying to find a full solution. New ideas and technologies carry profound transformational implications because of the need to integrate the force structures, doctrines and operations. Besides saving on the organisational time, this approach promises better absorption of the cutting edge war fighting technologies and act as an accelerator for initiating and sustaining large scale transformations in the armed forces.

Fourthly, for any transformational process to succeed, Admiral Cebrowski argues that there is need to "sow dragon's teeth". In other

words, the need to embed agents of change in the decision making process of the target organisations. There is no denying the fact that most durable change is always affected by changing military attitudes, culture and procedures that emerge from the bottom. But then offices or officials charged with putting in place the transformational agenda at the apex level are equally important. Strong commitment demonstrated by the change agents at the highest level can surely expedite the military transformation process.

Fifthly, the agents for change need to grow an environment for intense debate and discussion within length and breadth of the organisation. In absence of an amicable reasoning environment, the ability of military organisations to pursue large scale change can prove extremely difficult. A network enabled environment too would facilitate the pace of change and, therefore, it is an important pre-requisite to usher in military change.

Lastly, there is a need to gradually expand the network for change and as Cebrowski says "let the sun shine", in other words implying that openness and free thinking in organisational thought and working alone can lead to large scale transformations in the armed forces.

The Indian Context

History is replete with examples of radical, modest and even failed transformations, thus revealing the fact that the armed forces are intrinsically not flexible enough to accept transformational change in military ideas and technologies. In fact, successful military transformations have been characterised by coherence in organisational vision on the evolving nature of conflict, flexible mid segment and senior leadership, robust resource funding and above all the organisational inclination for experimentation. Today, in tune with our country's growing regional stature and good economic health, the Indian Armed forces too need to transformation to meet the emerging challenges for the 21st century. While there are strong reasons to infuse new ideas and prepare for over the horizon threats to shape our future military capabilities, it is also important to approach the issue in a comprehensive and methodical manner to flesh out the concept, scope and direction of required military transformation. Some key transformational questions in our own context are flagged.

Firstly, it is to identify the compelling need for transformation in the armed forces or the `why' of change is perhaps the first logical step towards obtaining a clear understanding of the change process. The security environment and its implications and, in this context, the need to re-think our military capability needs for the 21st century are

important issues of concern.

Secondly, the scope of transformation or the `what' of change. This would involve an end to end examination of the transformational objectives and end states that are desired to be achieved. In this context, also understand the choices, options and consequences of any large scale change in the armed forces.

Thirdly, implementing change or the `how' of change is all about cutting through old mindsets, developing core transformational leadership and organisational drive. This involves deep understanding of organizational theories and motivations for large scale structural changes, as also reconciling issues concerning resourcing options, possibilities and timelines.

To conclude, Jeffrey W. Legro an eminent American scholar once said that, "militaries are notorious for being stuck in tradition, yet they [are successful in] embracing dramatically new ways of [waging] war". In other words hinting at how adoption of particular strategies can help bring in change in the armed forces. It is therefore important to understand why some militaries are more adept than others in re-inventing themselves and, why some efforts succeed rapidly, while others only gather momentum over a period of time or become side tracked or subverted in due course. As said earlier, for any meaningful military transformation to take place, there is a need to create suitable structures and sustain the momentum of change. This can best be achieved through a flexible decision making process that facilitates development, fielding and implementation of new military ideas and technologies, while preventing premature jettisoning of old ideas and practices from the armed forces. *idsa*