

## Doklam makes India's defence reforms more difficult

Given the recent media reports about fresh transgressions by the Chinese troops on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) since the Doklam crisis, it is now safe to say that the high-octane national security rhetoric by the Narendra Modi government has done little to strengthen India's military stance on the disputed border. On the contrary, the Indian Army has skewed even more towards a border policing force (from a border guarding one) on its watch. This has slowed down the army's modernization and blunted its combat capabilities. Worse, it has hampered defence reforms necessary to make the Indian military suitable for modern wars.

According to official statistics, there were 415 transgressions in 2017, compared to 271 in the previous year, with 216 of them leading to face-offs between the two troops. In 2016, there were 146 face-offs. What's more, there are now 23 areas of major disputes on the LAC. In 1995, there were two, which rose to 12 after the 1998 nuclear tests when India cited China as the main reason for doing so. The surge from 12 to 23 has happened since the arrival of the Modi government in May 2014, when, unlike previous governments, bilateral disagreements have been publicly played out for domestic audiences.

Given this, two observations are noteworthy. One, Chinese transgressions have increased commensurate with growing political disagreements, and disparity between the military power and border management of the two sides. And two, China will not hesitate to conduct transgressions and intrusions as part of negotiations to keep India imbalanced.

With these increased transgressions and areas of disagreements, the Indian Army has been compelled to plug ingress gaps with more troops to stop Chinese forces from violating the LAC. Offensive forces, like the newly raised 17 Mountain Corps, are being used for policing duties. The latter duties are worse than guarding duties which do allow use of violence if needed. And soldiers perched in high-altitude areas where survival itself is a challenge are bound to feel demoralized facing the non-visible enemy.

Faced with this ground reality, the Indian Army will not be able to reduce its strength substantially to become a lean and mean fighting force. The massive involvement of the army in anti-infiltration and counterterror operations in Jammu and Kashmir, and now the need for heavy policing on the 3,488km-long LAC, will disallow reduction in the army's strength of 1.3 million troops. Instead of cutting the teeth (combat forces), tinkering with the tail (support arms), which is being done, will not help.

This growing flab is now coming in the way of its modernization programme. According to a recent report by the Parliament standing committee on defence, "the ratio of the revenue-to-capital outlay is skewed as the budget for capital acquisitions for the services is declining in comparison to revenue allocations, adversely affecting the modernization process of our forces." Since the army has been spending its capital allocation (for modernization and new acquisitions) to meet its revenue obligations (salaries, allowances and perks of soldiers), it will continue to hold outdated weapons, harming troops' effectiveness. That is not all. Whatever little is left of the annual capital allocation would be spent on importing varieties of ammunition and critical spare parts since the indigenous defence industry has been found wanting. This explains why, despite having the maximum allocation amongst the three defence services, the army is the least modernized in comparison with the air force and the navy.

Moreover, since the army is heavily committed to its defensive responsibilities on the two borders (the Line of Control against Pakistan is equally debilitating), it is unable to go back to its primary task: training to fight modern wars. The latter requires an offensive orientation through total

synergy between all domains of war: namely, land, air, sea, cyber, space, electronic and information, in order to accomplish jointness in war-fighting. With the army employed in domain-specific defence tasks, it has little time, orientation, weaponry and training to undertake jointness.

For example, while speaking at the army's premier think-tank, the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), the army chief, General Bipin Rawat, spoke about the primacy of the army in war, with the other two services being in support of its operations. This is the anti-thesis of what modern wars are about. With more war-fighting domains, precision and stand-off weapons, modern wars will require minimal contact between opposing forces, which is the prerogative of armies.

Thus, all professional militaries undertake periodic reviews to decide required military reforms to meet the challenges of modern wars. China started its military reforms in 2015 and plans to finish them by 2035 in two phases. By 2020, it will have achieved jointness for territorial defence, and by 2035, it hopes to have jointness for out-of-area operations in support of China's One Belt One Road project.

In India, unfortunately, this is not so. The Integrated Defence Staff Headquarters, responsible for military reforms, cannot do much until the army goes back to its basics, that is, war-fighting. With increased Chinese transgressions, this doesn't look possible any time soon. It is about time we realized that rhetoric doesn't change realities; only careful planning and action does.

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