

Don't cut corners on India's defence needs

It is a rare display of displeasure by the country's armed forces. In a report presented to Parliament on Tuesday, the Standing Committee on Defence said the funds allocated to the armed forces in the defence budget for the next fiscal were inadequate to address the security challenges staring India in the face. There are "huge deficiencies and obsolescence of weapons, stores and ammunition existing in Indian Army," said the report. Vice Chief Lt Gen Sarath Chand told the House panel that the sum earmarked for modernisation (Rs 21,338 crore) wasn't enough to fund the 125 ongoing schemes, emergency procurements and weaponry for 10 days of intense war. The government has allocated Rs 2.95 lakh crore for military spending during 2018-19. Of the Rs 2,95,511 crore, Rs 99,947 crore is pegged for capital outlay which includes expenditure on modernisation.

One implication of this shortfall is that the Indian Army will not be able to acquire new major weapon platforms during 2018-19. New acquisition deals, such as those for artillery guns, attack helicopters and infantry weapons, likely to be signed in this period, could be delayed. The implementation of the Seventh Central Pay Commission and the One Rank One Pension formula means that the Army's wage and pensions bill has seen a spike. Payroll and pension costs will constitute 56% of defence expenditure. In effect, in 2018-19, the army is likely to spend significantly more on pensions than on acquiring new weapons platforms.

Lack of modernisation and shrinking defence spending are not the only problems the Army is confronted with. The procurement process is often onerous. An internal ministry study reportedly said the process was so slow that, in the past three years, less than 10% of proposed arms deals met their timelines. Make in India remains a mere slogan in the world's largest importer of defence equipment. No wonder, to expedite capital acquisitions, defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman set up a Raksha Mantri Advisory Committee on Ministry of Defence Capital Projects last month.

Analysts perceive it as a case of misplaced priorities. India's share of the defence budget as a ratio of the Total Central Government Expenditure for 2018-19 is 12.1%. In Pakistan, it is to the tune of 25-30%. India has just 1.25 soldiers per 1,000 people compared to China's 2.23 and Pakistan's 4.25. Also, for the last six years, India's defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP has been shrinking — this year it slipped to a new low of 1.57% of the GDP, the lowest ever drop in defence expenditure as a percentage of the GDP since 1962 when India was at war with China.

With respect to the increased threat perception, the possibility of a two-front war, flashpoints such as Doklam, rampant cross-border firing and militancy, there appears to be a mismatch between the operational needs of the army and the monies allocated to it. Critics say the Indian Armed Forces (especially the Army) is arguably too person-heavy and needs force rationalisation. Still, till the time the Army's pensions and wages bill continues to weigh down its finances, the push for modernisation and battle preparedness — and meeting urgent requirements for light machine guns, rifles, ammunition, tanks and combat vehicles — may have to wait.

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