FEATURE

Pushing Boundaries
Can the Indian Military Transform?

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Abstract

The article argues that any discussion on the transformation of a nation's military must consider the conflict environment in which this transformation takes place. From an Indian perspective, the possibility of large-scale conventional wars, limited wars, and subconventional conflicts in varied terrain, including vast maritime spaces under a nuclear shadow, remains distinct. As a result, India needs to maintain its continental posture and a large standing army to maintain credible deterrence against external adversaries and to plug internal fissures and cracks. The need to maintain a large navy and air force is also necessary for deterrence, latent coercive capability, and support for the expansion of interests and influence. However, the article argues that India needs to consider restructuring and integrating its army, navy, and air force to meet contemporary challenges and pool capabilities with partners, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, where China is steaming ahead. Failure to do so will leave India open to sustained pressure on multiple fronts. The article concludes by highlighting the need for India's military to confront uncertainties and emerge as the sword arm of Indian statecraft in its quest for leading power status.

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Notwithstanding its ancient civilization and inherited wisdom, India remains somewhat tentative and unsure about the use of power.

—Admiral Arun Prakash, retired

Continued threats, constant stress, and periodic conflicts over seven decades across the 6,000-kilometer land frontiers with Pakistan and China have significantly shaped India's military force structure. The proliferation of internal armed conflict along India’s land periphery and the widespread employment of the Indian Army (IA) in counterinsurgency (COIN), counterterrorism (CT), and internal stability operations over the past six decades have resulted in an army-centric, reactive, and manpower-heavy approach to war fighting—with suboptimal emphasis on innovation and a combined arms approach.¹

¹ An earlier version of this work appeared as a chapter in Ashley J. Tellis, Bibek Debroy, and C. Raja Mohan, Grasping Greatness: Making India a Leading Power (Gurugram, Haryana, India: Penguin Random House India, 2022), 527–70.

However, in recent years, there have been incremental changes in the way India’s political establishment is willing to look at its armed forces as an effective instrument of statecraft. There is also a willingness to move from an overall posture of reactive deterrence vis-à-vis India’s adversaries to one that can at best be termed as proactive deterrence. From an Indian perspective, while the former refers to a propensity to react to a crisis with excessive caution and only consider military responses after a crisis has unfolded, such as the Parliament attack of December 2001 and the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008, the latter signals a willingness to respond with firmness to restrict the adverse impact of a perceived act of aggression, as what happened in Doklam. India's current military posture does not exactly suggest a muscular shift, as argued by some—it merely reflects a willingness to move in that direction. However, it is seriously hampered by a lack of capability and adequate synergy between various stakeholders of national security. Some changes in the realm of alignments and partnerships and a realization that new challenges like the emergence of contested strategic spaces in the Indo-Pacific now present opportunities to accelerate integration and synergy within India’s armed forces. Consequently, a shift from a predominantly continental and conventional war-fighting mind-set to a more holistic and contemporary one that focuses on the maritime, aerospace, and cyber domains in full-spectrum operations is inevitable, as issues such as influence and protection of interests gain traction, particularly in the maritime domain.

This article examines how elements of a transformed Indian military could further Indian political objectives in the Indo-Pacific strategic space over the next two decades, given a conservatively linear growth in capability and a defense budget that would strain to cross 2 percent of GDP unless a black swan event—like the Kargil conflict, or a prolonged continuation of the current face-off with China in Eastern Ladakh—forces greater allocation of resources. There is little doubt that China’s increasing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) over the past few years, and its current belligerence in Eastern Ladakh, has forced India to strengthen its security relationship and engagement with not only the United States but also with Japan, Australia, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam, thereby expanding its footprint from the IOR to a wider expanse that has now been conveniently termed as the Indo-Pacific. To focus exclusively on the India—

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2 Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, “Is India Starting to Flex its Military Muscle?,” Foreign Policy, 17 October 2017, http://foreignpolicy.com/. It can be argued that events following the Doklam incident do not support this proposition.

US dimension of the Indo-Pacific is restrictive and deflects from the larger issue of India's security challenges.\textsuperscript{4}

Other significant drivers that have necessitated transformation are a recognition of the need to create force structures that are lean, rapidly deployable, and adaptable to the swiftly changing nature of contemporary conflict in a volatile security environment under squeezed budgetary conditions. The critical driver of transformation to cope with these changes, however, will have to be political decisiveness and the courage to initiate structural reforms, while also demanding greater accountability from all stakeholders of national security, including India's military-scientific-industrial complex. As Ashley Tellis argues, one of the key determinants of India acquiring great power status will be “acquiring effective military capability for power projection coupled with wise policies for their use.”\textsuperscript{5}

The Contemporary Strategic Landscape

Considering that the Indo-Pacific as a security construct is here to stay as long as it remains an area of strategic contest between two of the world’s preeminent powers, the United States and China, and the emergence of India as a leading power of some consequence in the same region, a survey of some geo-military challenges and assumptions from an Indian military perspective is in order. China and Pakistan would continue to pose significant conventional military challenges under the protective umbrella of their nuclear arsenals. The collusive nature of the China–Pakistan relationship, Pakistan’s proxy strategy in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and sporadic border face-offs and skirmishes would ensure that the IA remains deployed in large numbers in its current profile.\textsuperscript{6} Consequently, it would continue to resist any major shift away from a continental focus on war fighting. India’s demographic challenges will be significant,\textsuperscript{7} and, despite a concerted top-down approach at creating leaner structures, the inability to productively harness its huge youth bulge could well mean that a large standing military will remain a


\textsuperscript{6} For an interesting and structurally sound argument on various possibilities in Jammu & Kashmir, see Paul Staniland, “Kashmir since 2003: Counterinsurgency and the Paradox of Normalcy,” \textit{Asian Survey} 53, no. 5 (October 2013): 931–57.

\textsuperscript{7} Tellis, \textit{India as a Leading Power}, 7.
developmental imperative that will change only when India’s population inversion commences in the middle of the current century.

However, as alluded to earlier, the Indo-Pacific—with emphasis on the IOR—would drive India’s maritime focus and force it to develop joint war-fighting capabilities for out-of-area contingency (OOAC) and expeditionary operations. This would also bring to the fore the importance of aerospace power as an enabling force multiplier in full-spectrum operations. The Indian Navy (IN) and Indian Air Force (IAF) would continue to struggle with budgets, capabilities, and numbers to meet India’s rising power-projection aspirations. While the navy would largely benefit from its focus on indigenization, the IAF would remain afflicted with acquisition woes and seek to compensate with high levels of training, operational preparedness, and interoperability with Western and partner air forces like those from the United States, France, Singapore, and the United Kingdom.

Military capability development in China and India over the next two decades would be linear and in line with current trends. Consequently, the existing differential will widen discomfortingly and force India to review its strategic options and deepen military synergies with strategic partners and possible allies like the United States, Japan, Vietnam, and France. The military dimension of the India–US strategic partnership would continue to be robust and emerge stronger than many current alliances that the US military has a stake in. Technology transfer and coproduction of cutting-edge platforms could see India emerge as a modest hub for defense production in the Indo-Pacific. The India–France security and technological collaboration will be robust as India seeks to hedge its strategic partnership with Russia against a downside, as one prominent strategic commentator has argued.

It is expected that a Strategic Defence Review, National Security Strategy, and International Defence Engagement Strategy will provide the necessary vision for synergized single-service and joint military doctrines.

The four strategic drivers that can play a key role in the operational transformation of India’s military and service its aspirations for leading power status are: management of rapid power shifts, proactive deterrence, active protection of overseas interests, and operational conversion of existing and emerging capabilities.

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8 India’s strategic establishment has always been chary of the term expeditionary operations, preferring to use the term out-of-area contingency operations.

9 A reflection of this approach has already sunk in with the IAF conducting its exercise Gaganshakti in April 2018 with an intensity seldom seen in the past.


Servicing a Leading Power Role

Managing Rapid Power Shifts

In a talk at the Munich Security Forum held at New Delhi in 2014 soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Kumar Doval spelled out with some clarity what he perceived to be his greatest concerns about global security. Foremost among them were rapid power shifts and the need to restore equilibrium through swift collaborative action. Flowing from this concern, signs of a subtle shift in India’s approach to deterrence have prompted commentators to ask whether an era of effective deterrence and paradigm shift in the way security is understood in the country has commenced.

Addressing military commanders aboard INS Vikramaditya months later in December 2015, Modi advised them to reform their “beliefs, doctrines, objectives and strategies.” He continued, “[A]t a time when major powers are reducing their forces and relying more on technology, we are still constantly seeking to expand the size of our forces. Modernization 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.” The language and intent were right, but whether they would translate into perceptible shifts in doctrine would ultimately dictate the pace of reform in the Indian military. The French Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017 articulates five strategic functions that India would do well to emulate if it wants to convert policy drivers into effective operational strategies. These are deterrence, protection, knowledge and anticipation, intervention, and prevention.

Proactive Deterrence

India’s approach to deterrence over the years has primarily revolved around denial strategies that sought to blunt an adversary’s capacity to cause significant damage through resilience and then push back with strength. Doval’s speech at the Munich Security Forum promised that deterrence mechanisms in India would demonstrate an environmental adaptability that catered to new actors, new means

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12 Excerpts from a talk delivered by India’s National Security Advisor Ajit Kumar Doval, 21 October 2014, https://securityconference.org/.
of warfare, and new contexts. Though there has been an attempt by the present government to showcase that the cross-border strikes against Naga rebels along the Indo-Myanmar border, the “surgical strikes” across the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan, the IA’s push back at Doklam, and the IAF’s preventive air strikes at Balakot are indicators of this newfound assertiveness, the situation on the ground is a mixed bag of results. Nagaland has been quiet since the 2016 strikes, and the proxy war in J&K has shown signs of waning after the Indian security forces eliminated the largest number of terrorists in 2018 in an eight-year period and the government followed that with the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A in 2019.\(^\text{16}\) One could also argue that the IA’s assertive stance in Doklam further validated this shift, as did the Balakot air strikes. However, the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) infrastructure building effort continues barely a few kilometers to the east of the contentious areas in Bhutanese territory.\(^\text{17}\) Making matters even more complicated was the PLA’s swift aggression in the summer of 2020 when it transgressed widely in disputed areas of Eastern Ladakh, an action that sparked fears of a limited conflict between the two Asian powers and triggered a reactive but firm response from India over the next few months.\(^\text{18}\) It is in this complex environmental milieu that India’s emerging position of proactive deterrence remains a work in progress.

Though preemptive, preventive, or coercive strategies were never the first choice of India’s strategic establishment in the past, the fierce response to Chinese provocation at Nathu La, a high-altitude pass in the Sikkim sector, in 1967; the occupation of the Saltoro Ridge, which dominates the Siachen Glacier in 1984; and a swift brigade-sized heli-landed operation at Sumdorong Chu (Arunachal Pradesh) in response again to Chinese incursions in the region are some examples of India seizing the operational initiative. An assessment of all three operations points at isolated and personality-orientated decision making, involving assertive military leaders being able to convince the political leadership of the necessity to seize the initiative. However, continuous political instability in the 1980s and 1990s and serious financial constraints led to an inability to clearly enunciate preemption and prevention as


\(^{18}\) Ashley Tellis, “India’s Response to Chinese Aggression in Ladakh has been very good, says scholar Ashley Tellis,” *The Print*, 7 November 2020, https://theprint.in/.
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a doctrinal underpinning despite the scaling up of the ongoing proxy war waged against India in J&K by Pakistan and increasing Chinese assertiveness along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).\textsuperscript{19} Nine years into the present Bharatiya Janata Party–led government’s gradually transforming deterrence posture, which Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur have likened to flexing of military muscle, there is a clear willingness to induce some heft to deterrence.\textsuperscript{20} However, in a clear strategic divide, skeptics of force application and technology–driven force structures have been cautioning the government against escalation along the LoC and “blindly buying into the optical power of technological innovation.”\textsuperscript{21} The punitive strikes along the Myanmar border against the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khaplang (NSCN–K) in June 2015 were the first calibrated step on the part of Prime Minister Modi’s national security team in testing the deterrence and escalation ladder. It allowed Indian Special Forces to gain self-belief in their already–proven capabilities and went one step further in 2016 by testing the response of an irrational adversary during a series of shallow cross-border strikes against terrorist camps/shelters/staging areas in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Notwithstanding the fact that such operations were conducted in the past, the present set of well–executed tactical operations have had a positive impact on the morale of India’s armed forces like rarely before; they have demonstrated improved short–of–war military capabilities and allowed the government to explore “harder options” when the intended outcomes were not forthcoming. The IAF strike at Balakot was a result of this exploratory process and resulted in the Indian strategic establishment having to navigate through uncharted territory ever since. Apart from gaps in capability that need urgent attention, the IAF’s spirited air defense response the next day to counter a powerful Pakistan Air Force (PAF) package signals a willingness to push boundaries of robust deterrence. Questions on whether Prime Minister Modi’s government will follow through with its articulated posture that “this will be the new normal” were put to rest when the air strikes were followed by the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A in J&K, a move that sucked the oxygen out of the Pakistan–led secessionist proxy war. Some signs of a realization that Pakistan’s deep state seems

\textsuperscript{19} Jonathan Renshon, \textit{Why Leaders Choose War: The Psychology of Prevention} (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 149. Also see 87–106. All the conditions that support preventive and preemptive action by India against Pakistan existed (declining power of Pakistan vis–à–vis India, inherent bad faith between the two, a widespread belief that war was inevitable, a knowledge that only a “short window was available to act,” a situation that favored an offensive) and yet India chose to be reactive during the period 1988–2017.

\textsuperscript{20} Ganguly and Kapur, “Is India Starting to Flex its Military Muscle?,” 2017.

to be reflecting on a sane conclusion that waging a covert war against India hurts its own society more than that of its adversary have led to some recent “green shoots” in the peace process through a renewed ceasefire agreement. These are issues that trouble over a billion Indians and Pakistanis.

Faced with the renewed collusive threat from the China–Pakistan duo, the deterrence debate in India is heating up as a growing power, like India, is seeking a new normal and stakeholders, like the IAF, are arguing that it is now fusing in capabilities that would allow it to practice dissuasive compellence. If India is serious about effectively managing multiple adversaries and significantly raising the costs of aggression against it, India will naturally have to sharpen its military tools and develop more proactive, synergized, and networked operational strategies.

**Protection of Overseas Interests**

In the past, India has sporadically attempted to protect its overseas interest, which primarily comprises the safety of its diaspora and burgeoning economic investments, with stray expressions of kinetic and nonkinetic military capability to retain influence and assist friendly neighbors in distress. Following the signing of the Indo–Sri Lanka Peace Accord (ISLA) in July 1987, the Indian government deployed the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) rather hastily in an attempt to restore peace in the troubled island. While the primary reason for the intervention was to oversee the implementation of the ISLA and broker peace between Tamil separatist groups and the Sri Lankan government, it had concurrent strategic objectives of restricting the entry of extraregional powers such as the United States into the region should the latter show an interest in such mediation. Many commentators like to showcase India’s military intervention in Maldives in 1988 in response to an urgent request for help from then–President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who was facing a coup, as a copybook intervention operation, and due credit must be given to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi for his decisiveness. The gradual evolution of India’s intervention policies has crystallized over the years, and its successful nonkinetic interventions in Kuwait, Libya, and Yemen, where it evacuated thousands of citizens by swiftly deploying its air and naval assets, reflect

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emerging clarity in this domain. The lack of doctrinal clarity, however, obfuscates decision making and leaves much to the personality of the decision makers.

In his many forays overseas, Prime Minister Modi repeatedly emphasizes the protection of Indian interests and diaspora as important as India’s role as a preferred security provider in the IOR. New Delhi’s continued attempts at engaging IOR littorals, such as Mauritius and Seychelles, and closely watching developments in Sri Lanka and Maldives indicate that India is not going to be a pushover, especially given China’s massive dual-purpose infrastructure investments in the IOR through its ambitious Maritime Silk Route portion of the Belt and Road Initiative and increased naval presence in the region. India’s military means of protection of overseas interests comprise a combination of initiatives that ensure presence and demonstrate intent. While the former is achieved through continuous deployment of Indian naval ships on “flying the flag” missions, the latter is ensured through increasing operational engagements with strategic partners.25 Regular conduct of military exercises and a willingness to position military training teams to build capacity are some such initiatives. While regular engagement with strategic partners like the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Singapore offers opportunities to the Indian military to enhance interoperability and absorb best practices, propositions of military assistance to smaller partner nations—such as Afghanistan, Seychelles, Mauritius, Oman, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and African states, such as Uganda—demonstrate modest intent and growing reach. Building credible expeditionary and power-projection capability is the next operational step to support this doctrinal posture.

Improving Operational Conversion

Conversion of Prime Minister Modi’s advise to his military commanders into operational deliverables demands the dismantling of the status quo within civilian and military bureaucracy, which are comfortable with it and satisfied with incremental changes in reform and doctrine. The three elements that would facilitate this transformation are structural reform, leapfrogging, and embracing technology. While the institution of the post of chief of defence staff (CDS) and the creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in December 2019 are welcome steps,26 structural reform would only be complete with the comprehensive integration of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) with service headquarters.

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with cross-pollination and adapted to Indian conditions. The institution of a progressively empowered CDS with operational accountability to Parliament is considered essential, though it is assessed that the predominance of conventional continental threats and the overwhelming influence of the IA will impede a level playing field in this process unless there is decisive political direction.\(^\text{27}\) A road map for integrated theater commands would be next in line despite fierce turf battles between the three services. Rather than have separate integrated commands (space, cyber, and special forces) to placate service requirements, India would do well to create an integrated force like the PLA’s Strategic Support Force called Strategic Enabling Command that includes space, cyber, information, and electronic warfare.\(^\text{28}\) For starters though, the creation of two brigade plus-sized integrated battle groups (IBG) comprising land, aerial, and naval components with embedded humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) elements on the east and west coasts to deal with expeditionary and OOAC operations could empower the CDS sufficiently during the teething years of transition. Though still a work in progress, the announcement of the impending creation of an Air Defence Command, and a Maritime Command thereafter, were supposed to kick-start the process in right earnest.\(^\text{29}\) However, the untimely death of India’s first CDS, General Bipin Rawat, and the inability of the three services to roll out an India-specific integration model, has delayed any further reform. The appointment of Lt Gen Anil Chauhan (R), the Military Advisor (MA) to the National Security Advisor (NSA), as the second CDS of India is likely to ensure that integration remains a Key Result Area (KRA) for the Modi Government.

Traditionally associated with operational maneuvers that facilitate the bypassing of static or sluggish defenses with speed and surprise, the application of leapfrogging at the strategic level from the Indian standpoint involves taking tough decisions in the doctrinal, technological, and intellectual dimension of war fighting. Lagging a rapidly transforming Chinese military, India has no choice but to leapfrog across decades of stagnation in all the areas mentioned above. By raising the level of intellectual capital within the armed forces, infusing a greater level of understanding of the military within the political establishment, and making

\(^{27}\) The author has been consistently critical of piecemeal changes to the higher defense organization and operational structures, but not of the aspirational final objective of complete integration.


radical changes in India’s defense research innovation and industrial complex, India has an opportunity to bypass lost fourth-generation opportunities and catch up with China. This will only be possible if New Delhi seizes collaborative opportunities, abandons rigid notions of surrendering strategic autonomy, and engages with partners on sensitive technology-related projects in cutting-edge areas such as space, sensor fusion, aircraft and warship design, radars, and weapons, to name a few. Only if all the above initiatives are woven into the ambitious Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative (Self-Reliant India) will India’s defense manufacturing ecosystem rise to the China challenge.

Leapfrogging in the intellectual domain would necessitate major reform in professional military education (PME) to widen horizons and empower the military to deal with the complexities of a multi-domain conflict in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment. This would include embedding multidisciplinary civilian faculty in teaching and research positions at academies and war colleges and opening opportunities for academically inclined medium and senior leadership to avail of sabbaticals at carefully selected universities across the world.

Offering a balanced assessment of India’s current position in this domain, Ashley Tellis argues, “Partly because of poor national policies, India today has major shortcomings in regard to the quality of its academic achievements, the resources committed to research, and the competence needed to develop advanced military critical technologies and to integrate complex systems.”

**Indian Army: Need for Multi-Domain Awareness and Capability**

While continental deterrence along stressed land frontiers will continue to occupy much of the focus of the IA, it needs to restructure defensive and offensive fighting formations to cater to the creation of the proposed dual-purpose IBG that could operate as joint task forces and execute both defensive and offensive missions with the individual services acting as capability and force providers. The IA has taken the lead in a serious attempt to “rightsize” its operational structures. Announcing this at the Army Commanders’ Conference (ACC) in 2018, the then-

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Chief of Army Staff General Bipin Rawat indicated that it was not the “tail” alone that would be trimmed, but also frontline infantry battalions.\(^{33}\) Instead of looking to raise additional forces to cover gaps created by shedding forces, the IA would leverage technology to increase surveillance through a multilayered network of satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), improved battlefield surveillance radars (BFSR), quick reaction teams (QRT) for varied terrain, and a reduced sensor-to-shooter loop that includes integral helicopter assets complemented by designated offensive and mobility airpower assets from the IAF.

Notwithstanding the absolute necessity of heavy armor in the desert sector, the IA will do well to rethink the density and profile of the elements of maneuver in the obstacle-ridden plains of Punjab and the mountainous terrain that runs along much of the LoC and the LAC. The PLA’s deployment of armor on the Tibetan Plateau must be countered not with a force-on-force philosophy, but with a combination of armor, robust antitank guided missiles (ATGM) defenses, and airpower that can interdict effectively. The rebalancing of the IA’s offensive formations by moving several elements from the western border northward to focus on China is the right step and conveys an intent that has been latent far too long.\(^ {34}\)

There was a move in the 1980s when General Krishnaswamy Sundarji and his then–Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) Lt General B.C. Joshi attempted to restructure India’s Para and Special Forces (SF) capability that clearly differentiated between airborne forces and special forces but failed because of institutional hubris and rigidity. Over time, the lines between Para and SF in the Indian context have blurred, with most Para battalions having also converted to SF that caters to specialized operations in diverse terrain (desert, mountains, and jungle).\(^ {35}\) Airborne assault and air-landed operations are distinctly different from SF operations, and expecting units to switch roles effortlessly is unreasonable given the difference in tasks assigned to the two forces. While the former are much like classical infantry assaults except that forces are inducted into the tactical battle area (TBA) through the medium of air, the latter comprises small-team missions with specialized tasks that can be assigned across the spectrum of conflict. If India’s armed forces are convinced that airborne assault and air-landed


\(^{35}\) Interview with Lt Gen R.K. Nanavatty (Retd) in August 2017, who was entrusted with this study in 1986–87 as a colonel. The study did not materialize into any meaningful structural changes. A revisit is essential if India’s Special Forces are to emerge as a decisive force.
operations will continue to remain relevant, particularly in OOAC or expeditionary operations, it must manage its mix of airborne forces and SF from internal manpower resources and focus on five domains: jungle, mountain, plains/desert, urban, and OOAC. The airborne forces should train with both IBG, while the SF would be controlled centrally and designated to theater commands based on the tasking and terrain.

Artillery played a pivotal role in the Kargil conflict. If the British imported M777 A-2 ultra-light 155-mm howitzers, with a maximum range of 30 kilometers, and the indigenously developed 155-mm towed medium guns with a range of more than 40 kilometers are not inducted with speed, Indian forces are likely to be interdicted severely in any assault, particularly if an adversary possesses superior fire support. Similarly, any high-altitude incursions of the Kargil kind cannot be countered with a firepower-intensive initial response if the IA does not have ultralight, mobile, and air-portable guns at its disposal and displays operational patience to shape the battlefield with air and artillery before launching infantry assaults.

There is also the need for significant improvements in command, control, communications and intelligence (C3I), particularly when it comes to battlefield situational awareness, sensor fusion, and interoperability, particularly with the IAF. Forward air controlling is still an archaic mission, which lags far behind the joint terminal attack controller (JTAC) concept that has been embraced by all modern armed forces that fight integrated battles across the spectrum of conflict. JTACs have been critical in COIN and urban operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and should be embedded in India’s COIN forces, particularly for checking infiltration and conducting raids against terrorist waiting areas or militant training camps along the LoC.

Lack of battlefield access to cope with the peculiarities of high-intensity limited wars, and not any grandiose offensive strategies, led to India’s much over-hyped Cold Start doctrine in the early part of the past decade. An archaic colonial cantonment culture along with a railway and road network that was not conducive to speedy movement of offensive formations from the hinterland into likely battle areas along the international border (IB) made it imperative for the IA to permanently locate offensive formations less than 100 kilometers away from the IB. The location of offensive formations outside the radii of action of enemy strike aircraft was an obsessive characteristic of sequential war fighting until the 1990s. It was only when the IAF acquired a reasonable degree of air superiority

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and assured the IA of minimum attrition to its strike corps that these offensive formations moved into their waiting areas before launching an offensive. This took anywhere between ten and 14 days, with a window of opportunity of a further two weeks, to conduct offensive operations before a likely ceasefire was usually expected to be negotiated. With such flexibility being a luxury of the past and the distinct possibility of short and intense limited conflicts under a nuclear overhang and stringent red lines emerging from the General Headquarters of the Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi, India had to produce a logistics plan that played out into this cycle and allowed it to achieve some operational objectives, given that India’s conventional military superiority would be leveraged during postconflict negotiations.

The Cold Start or Proactive Strategy that many refer to is merely a long overdue attempt to circumvent infrastructure and logistics shortfalls to ensure battlefield access.\(^37\) Even today, the IA needs to streamline its mobilization mission further through synergy with state governments and rail and road networks. While the IAF’s heavy airlift capability has been significantly enhanced and validated during the recent crisis in Eastern Ladakh to support the swift mobilization of the IA at speeds not seen before,\(^38\) it cannot substitute an efficient and heavy-duty road and railway network that supports both intra- and intertheater mobility.

**Indian Navy: Stabilizer in the IOR and Partner in the Indo-Pacific**

During his traditional press conference on the eve of Navy Day (3 December 2018), India’s former Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) Admiral Sunil Lanba, announced plans to add 56 surface warships, six submarines, and substantial naval aviation assets to the operational inventory of the IN in the next decade. While this capability accretion may be linked to a direct naval contest between the IN and the PLA Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean, it would fall short of the required numbers to cater to such an expansive strategy, as much of the accretion would replace legacy platforms.\(^39\) More specifically, it is likely that the induction of six *Scorpen* class submarines, *Arihant*-class nuclear submarines, and a sizable number of high-quality indigenously built surface combatants, such as the indigenous aircraft ca-
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riers, frigates, destroyers, corvettes, and fast-attack craft, would only replace the existing aging warships and may not contribute to any significant fleet accretion. Notwithstanding the cogent and expansive doctrine of 2015 that positions the IN as a key tool of military diplomacy and a net security provider in the IOR, it currently clearly lacks the capability to expand this posture to areas of the Indo-Pacific that lie east and south of the Sunda Straits because of two primary reasons. First is a recognition that the IOR segment of the Indo-Pacific is of immediate significance and takes up much of the IN’s resources—since 2016, the IN has had near-continuous deployments in six locations in the IOR and is stretched to expand this to distant seas. Flowing from the first limitation, a corollary impediment to fulfilling the emerging requirements of the Indo-Pacific construct is budgetary support for the IN allocated at a mere 14 percent of the 2018–19 Defence Budget. What is even more alarming is that the capital budget of the IN has only increased 1 percent annually for the past ten years as of 2016.

In terms of mission orientation, the suggested creation of two IBGs located in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and at Karwar in Karnataka, with specific OOAC tasking, is likely to draw significant resources out of the two major fleets, the Western and Eastern Fleets, which have their defensive and offensive tasks cut out in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal respectively. Consequently, there could be an emergent need for a robust third fleet in the southern region, especially since the IN must support its expanded operational missions into the southern oceans over the next decade. This requirement is unlikely to be met soon due to serious fiscal constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It could be argued that with the changing texture of large-fleet engagements on the high seas that would mainly comprise beyond-visual-range (BVR) engagements and the absence of muscular offensive capability represented by multiple carrier task forces (CTF), like the kinds possessed by the US Navy, the traditional Mahanian missions of sea denial, sea control, and protection of extended sea lanes of communications would need some reflection. Maritime defense, maritime diplomacy, and protection of maritime interests and influence with limited but ad-

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41 The six deployments have been in the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Aden, Southwestern Indian Ocean, Central and Southern Indian Ocean, Northern Bay of Bengal, Malacca & Sunda Straits. See Commodore Srikant Kesnur, “Indian Navy-Mission Deployed and Combat Ready,” *Times of India*, Mumbai edition, 4 December 2018.


equately coercive offensive and power-projection capability can be the new normal. When synergized with other elements of India’s maritime power such as the Coast Guard, space assets for maritime surveillance and commercial shipping, the country’s comprehensive maritime strategy should flow out of the proposed national security doctrine or strategy. This is not a major departure from how the IN sees itself as the lynchpin of India’s maritime strategy, and rightfully so.\textsuperscript{44}

Heavily outnumbered in the subsurface domain by the PLAN without any possibility of closing the gap over the next two decades,\textsuperscript{45} the IN cannot possibly think of robust sea control as its primary war-fighting role unless it has a minimum of a two-carrier fleet complemented by adequate antisubmarine warfare capability. Until then, control in open seas and in any conflict scenario is tantamount to wishful thinking with the much-debated blockade mission in India’s northern Arabian Sea—a mission that cannot be accomplished considering that Gwadar in Pakistan will be a dual responsibility of the PLAN and Pakistan Navy. Until India’s second aircraft carrier is fully operational by the end of 2023 and offers flexibility of deployments and force application strategies, sea denial could remain the main war-fighting role of the IN, particularly when faced with a rapidly expanding and numerically vastly superior PLAN.

Surface and aerial antisubmarine warfare (ASW) have already emerged as key deterrent missions. The IN is the second-largest operator of the Boeing P-8I Poseidon, after the US Navy, and must continue to be supported with an adequate budgetary allocation. Acting as a significant force multiplier in this mission will be the enhancement of the IN’s multi-domain awareness with partner support. This is highly probable, considering the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), Communication and Compatibility Security Agreement (COMCASA), and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA), all of which have been significant steps in the US–India Strategic Partnership.\textsuperscript{46} While the former will enhance logistics interoperability, particularly in the maritime domain, the latter two will provide

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{44} Clearly enunciated in the official National Maritime Strategy.
\item \textsuperscript{45} The Indian Navy currently has less than 20 submarines as against the PLAN strength of more than 70 submarines. See “India vs China: A comparison of the Indian and Chinese (PLA) Navies,” Naval Technology, 9 September 2020, https://www.naval-technology.com/.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Mark Rosen et al., “The U.S.-India Relationship: Putting the Foundational Agreements in Perspective,” \textit{CNA Report}, February 2017. Produced by the CNA’s Strategic Studies Division, the paper offers a convincing perspective of why India stands to gain significantly by signing the CISMOA and BECA given the increasing convergence on operational issues between the United States and India. Also see Dinakar Peri, “LEMOA fully operational now,” \textit{The Hindu}, 9 September 2018, https://www.thehindu.com/; and Jeff Smith, “COMCASA: Another Step Forward for the United States and India,” \textit{The Diplomat}, 11 September 2018, https://thediplomat.com/.
\end{itemize}
India with space, aerial, and maritime situational awareness at an exponentially higher degree. Notwithstanding the much-needed boost given to India’s dedicated military satellite program with the launch of the naval satellite, GSAT-7, India’s space-based maritime awareness assets are inadequate to support its maritime aspirations of being a net security provider in the region, particularly since it is being seriously challenged by the regularity with which PLAN submarines and warships are making repeated and prolonged forays into the IOR.\footnote{Express Web Desk, “What Is GSAT-7 Rukmini?,” Indian Express, 5 July 2017, https://indianexpress.com.}

In terms of mission capability in the short term, naval aviation assets focus on maritime surveillance, ASW, and air defense of the fleet, while very few assets are left to conduct any meaningful offensive antishipping strikes over long distances. Any meaningful offensive aerial capability of a CTF in the medium term will necessarily have to integrate IAF capability, a mission that the IAF executes with significant finesse. Whether the IAF will be able to assign Jaguars, SU-30 MKIs, and Rafales from its current inventory of barely 31 or 32 fighter squadrons for this mission in a dual domain conflict with China (land and maritime) is debatable. The acquisition of a second carrier with a larger complement of offensive platforms will add significant punch to the IN. Commissioning its second carrier will be a test of the IN’s resolve to operationalize INS Vikrant, its indigenous aircraft carrier. With the completion of the fourth phase of its sea trials, the Vikrant is all set to be operationally inducted into the IN in a phased manner.\footnote{Yogesh Naik, “Indigenous Aircraft Carrier Handed over to Indian Navy,” Indian Express, 29 July 2022, https://indianexpress.com.}

Retaining a two-carrier fleet after the INS Vikramaditya is phased out will depend on India’s ability to commission its second indigenous carrier, the 65,000-tonne INS Vishal, by around 2032. Complementing the two futuristic carriers will be 57 yet-to-be-identified multirole 4th Gen+/5th Gen fighters that would form the offensive complement of the IN’s aviation arm. Where the IN will continue to punch above its weight is in the realm of maritime diplomacy and flying-the-flag missions. It will willingly lead coalitions or OOAC operations in a multinational environment, given its extensive experience of operating with all the leading navies of the world in varied maritime environments.\footnote{The Indian Navy has engaged in more than 75 exercises with friendly countries and strategic partners over the last decade. See “Exercises with Foreign Navies,” Indian Navy, https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/}
Indian Air Force: Looking Afresh at the Deep and Joint Battle

Like the IN, the IAF has doctrinal clarity in most areas of aerial war fighting, including how best to impact a joint battle, and has validated elements of its subconventional capability during the Balakot strike in February 2019.\(^{50}\) It has also validated several concepts in employing its offensive and enabling capabilities during the ongoing face-off with China in Eastern Ladakh that began in May 2020 and continues today.\(^{51}\)

But regrettably, while this clarity has been accompanied by excellent training and continuous validation of doctrinal precepts, it has seldom been backed with technological self-sufficiency and institutional support, and it is only now that there is political understanding in terms of what airpower can accomplish as a tool of statecraft.\(^{52}\) Despite being a highly proficient war-fighting force, declining force levels of its offensive aerial platforms have forced the IAF to constantly revise its mission accomplishment capability, particularly in the realm of offensive air operations across the spectrum of conflict.\(^{53}\) “Fighting the best with what we have” seems to be the current philosophy in the IAF when confronted with the dilemma of being realistic and yet not alarmist when it comes to offsetting the adverse impact of declining force levels with concepts like surge operations and swing-role capability.\(^{54}\)

If the IAF was expected to limp to its authorized strength of 42 squadrons only by 2032 as per earlier estimates, that date could well be pushed back by another few years, considering the slow tendering process for the purchase of the 114 multirole fighter aircraft (MRFA), the tardy rate of production of the indigenous Tejas fighters, and the fiscal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.\(^{55}\) Notwithstanding the brave figures put forward by successive chiefs of air staff, there may well be a strong case for the IAF to see the writing on the wall and recalibrate its strategies and mission focus with a reduced force structure in mind.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{53}\) Tellis, Troubles, They Come in Battalions.

\(^{54}\) An interpretation of the current IAF operational philosophy by the author, an experienced operational practitioner who recently retired from the IAF.


Pushing Boundaries

Mission reorientation is inevitable with reduced force levels and must be a careful mix of threat and capability-based assessments. Deep strikes with a strategic impact and a widespread attempt to dominate the airspace may have to give way to more selective targeting and localized dominance of airspace that is limited by space and time. Runway interdiction and attacks on critical infrastructure may be missions of the past, with greater emphasis on blinding the enemy’s radar, communication, and computer networks, or suppression of enemy air defenses (SEAD) being more profitable in short and high-intensity conflicts. Impacting the joint battle in and around the TBA in varied terrain with high-performance and multimission capable platforms, will be the acid test for a transformed IAF. Interdiction has always been a favorite mission of the IAF, and current capabilities, if supported by near real-time intelligence, have the potential of causing significant attrition to an adversary’s reserve forces before they are committed to combat, or depleting the combat potential of large mechanized formations as they rapidly induct across high-altitude terrain toward combat zones (these are merely hypothetical examples to indicate what interdiction can do). Well-controlled and technology-enabled battlefield air strikes (BAS), or close air support (CAS) as it is more commonly known across the world, is a mission that needs significant refinement not only within conventional TBAs in the plains and high-altitude terrain but also in COIN and urban environments. Current training regimens are suboptimal, mainly due to niggling turf and technology issues, and need to be addressed speedily before they start impacting operational outcomes. A fusion of manned and unmanned platforms into offensive missions is another area that may demand significant focus and reorientation.

The IAF can be sanguine that with the completed induction of the C-17 and C-130s, as well as that of the Chinook heavy-lift and Apache attack helicopters, the IAF’s transport and helicopter fleets will contribute significantly to its metamorphosis into a credible tool of statecraft. In a recent record-breaking effort, the IAF’s Western Air Command (WAC) airlifted 463 tonnes from a single base (Chandigarh) in six hours to multiple airfields and drop zones in the Ladakh sector. While such capability reflects the IAF’s commitment to effective logistics and sustenance operations in support of the IA in remote locations, it adds significant heft to the IAF’s rapid airlift capability (RAC) for likely expeditionary or OOAC and HADR operations. If there is a vital mission that has seen significant lag, it is the continued lack of focus and capability gap in casualty evacuation (CASEVAC), particularly in COIN and high-altitude operations. This is not to

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say that the IAF and aviation component of the IA have not shown great resolve and unbelievable courage in CASEVAC operations, particularly in Siachen. However, the platforms and life-saving equipment have never supported the indomitable courage of the aviators. Rescue of downed aircrew, extrication of wounded combatants from behind enemy lines, and CASEVAC support to SFs are some of the enabling missions that would get fresh impetus with the induction of platforms like the Chinook and Apache military helicopters. With the IAF having consolidated its air mobility fleets from a medium- to long-term perspective, the challenge would lie in balancing tactical and strategic tasks in a futuristic integrated structure that could involve theater commands with continental, maritime, and OOAC focus. Centralization of strategic mobility assets may be an inescapable imperative.

As India reviews its war-fighting strategies in terms of the human price it is willing to pay while waging wars of different kinds, airpower offers much in terms of achieving operational objectives with significant reduction of risk to one’s own ground troops as well as civilians. For this to fructify, there must be greater engagement of IAF strategists with the IA and the political establishment on two major fronts. First, to “resolve the tension between securing self-sufficiency in the production of advanced weapon systems (and platforms), and the need to maintain technological superiority over the nation’s adversaries for deterrence.”\textsuperscript{58} Second, to proliferate a greater understanding within the strategic community and the political executive of what airpower can and cannot do across the spectrum of conflict and debunk the longstanding perception that airpower is always escalatory.\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{The Centrality of Jointness}

\textbf{Grappling with Differences}

The IA remains the largest and most dominant element in the country’s national security structure, and rightly so, considering the enormous sacrifices it makes daily. Navies across the world are sanguine that they operate in a domain that is so unique that whatever the profile of operational structures, their share of the pie is assured as long as oceans remain contested spaces. Air forces across the world—and the IAF is no exception—have grappled with the reality that while they have the capability to deter and coerce at the strategic level and shape land

\textsuperscript{58} Tellis, \textit{India as a Leading Power}.

and maritime spaces in the operational domain, they lack the staying power that boots on ground and warships demonstrate to sustain operational and strategic outcomes.\textsuperscript{60}

Based on the string of cross-border punitive operations, consistent political signaling, and resilient national security responses in adverse circumstances since the current government has been in power, many will argue that the present administration has a pulse on the role of force in statecraft. While there is an element of truth in this proposition, more needs to be done in bridging the gap between the political establishment and the military in terms of understanding what the military can and cannot achieve as an effective tool of statecraft in India’s pursuit of “leading power” status. The inclusion of the IA and the IAF in operational talks with the Chinese to diffuse the Eastern Ladakh crisis is indicative of a willingness on the part of the current government to stay firm over its deterrent posture along the LAC.\textsuperscript{61}

Though the specter of “long wars” has not disappeared with the current Russia–Ukraine conflict extending into its second year, current paradigms of conflict in the conventional domain from an Indian standpoint at short, high-intensity, and geographically localized limited conflicts that demand synergized and simultaneous application of combat power. Airpower offers the element of surprise, thus the possibility of seizing an early initiative in any conflict. Even at the lower end of the spectrum of war fighting, synergized application of combat power is what gives nation-states that extra edge in a prolonged conflict against diffused adversaries, even if outcomes and not decisive victories are the order of the day.

If that is a given in contemporary warfare, why then is the ongoing Indian debate on physical integration of operational structures so fierce and marked by intransigence and continued protection of turf? No easy answers emerge, except that only an enlightened political leadership with a sound understanding of India’s armed forces, their DNA, strengths, and weaknesses can break down significantly asymmetric barriers that exist between a dominant army and the other two services.

\textbf{Expeditionary/OOAC Operations}

The biggest challenge for India’s armed forces in the years ahead will be to progressively identify the most challenging scenarios that would demand integration


\textsuperscript{61} Rajat Pandit, “Sr IAF Officer Was Present at Latest Talks with China,” \textit{Times of India}, 10 August 2022, 20.
The mission that immediately comes to mind is the expeditionary or OOAC operation in a hostile environment, both in a solo and coalition configuration that may or may not have UN sanctions but can be driven by national security imperatives. While the current operational thinking is focused on the former (UN-authorized or endorsed), it is essential that India understands that it may have to risk the latter in a rapidly changing and evolving regional security environment that could call for speed and decisiveness. Fusion of intelligence to mitigate risks, shaping the environment, and execution with speed and surprise are aspects that need to be seriously war-gamed in a multinational environment with both amphibious and air-landed, or a combination of both, being played out in various regions. It is reiterated that effective Indian involvement in a coalition operation, particularly in areas of space, intelligence, and electronic warfare (IEW) and communications interoperability would depend on joining existing information-sharing regimes and protocols and shedding fears of compromising security. One of India’s weaker links in its ability to support expeditionary/OOAC operations is a largely indigenous but inadequate military space program. Emerging as a byproduct of a fairly successful civilian space program and even matching China’s space program in some areas like robustness of launch vehicles, the number of navigation, surveillance, and reconnaissance satellites India has in space are woefully inadequate to cope with the expanding scope of India’s strategic aspirations. With China positioning monitoring stations in proxy states, the asymmetry is only likely to widen. It is inevitable that in the years ahead, as India engages in integrated military exercises with strategic partners against the current template of single-service engagements, it will either have to integrate its space resources with those of partner nations or rely on agreements like COMCASA to share space assets for military exploitation.

**High-Altitude Jointness**

The next joint mission that merits serious attention—despite having fought many campaigns at high altitude—is the joint army–air force campaign in a limited high-altitude conflict. Similar to the Kargil conflict of 1999, such contingencies have continued to emerge at multiple points along the LAC with China (along the Arunachal, Sikkim and Ladakh sectors). A clear example of this trend is the face-off

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62 Jointness or jointmanship are typical Indian doctrinal terms that largely conform to Western concepts of integration.


in Eastern Ladakh that commenced in May 2020 and still continues in a recessed form. Unlike the Kargil campaign, where a joint intelligence mosaic was completely absent, India should take into cognizance the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee Report and fuse in its own improved space-based situational and target-awareness capability with input from its strategic partners. Consequently, India’s response mechanisms are likely to be far more robust, and fears of being overwhelmed by a sustained PLA assault led by cyber, artillery, and the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) may well be unfounded. However, these are merely potential capabilities, and much ground needs to be covered in war gaming, communications, and network interoperability to convert them into actual operational capability.

**Future Force Structures**

**Indo-Pacific Focus**

Indian rulers in the past, particularly from the Chola dynasty, have used the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to project power in the Indian Ocean and as a key base for expeditions to the east. The IN has long recognized the islands’ potential as a strategic oceanic springboard as highlighted in the 1980s with Vice Admiral M.P. Awati (retired) arguing, “As the naval activities of the extra-regional powers are stepped up in the Southwest Pacific and spill over into the IOR, the significance of the Andaman Complex will increase.”

After much diffidence over converting the strategic potential of the Andamans into capability, the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) promises much in terms of emerging as a model for IBG (East) that could serve as a template for further integration, particularly in theaters where OOAC operations are likely to be the focus. The ANC would need significant strengthening in terms of naval assets to form a possible carrier battle group: army assets in the form of an amphibious brigade, air assets comprising at least two fighter squadrons and a squadron of medium-lift and utility helicopters, and multitiered ground-based air defense assets that can be seamlessly networked with onboard naval sensors. The expansion of the ANC, or its fusion with the proposed Maritime Command will need substantial infrastructure creation and can take more than a decade to complete. Wherever assets are not available, fighting formations can be attached on

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long-term rotational deployment as part of a dual-tasking philosophy. For example, Thanjavur Air Force Station in southern India can deploy some fighter assets to the ANC on a rotational basis till force levels permit the deployment of a permanent fighter squadron at Port Blair or Car Nicobar, the two airfields in ANC that support operations. The Defence of Andaman Nicobar Islands Exercise (DANX) conducted in October 2019 can serve as a template for progression to assault and offensive operations in the future. The IAF–USAF Cope India 2019 aerial exercise at Air Force Station Kalaikunda in the Indian state of West Bengal—involving USAF F-15s from the Pacific Air Forces and a variety of platforms from the IAF, including SU-30 MKIs, Airborne Warning And Control Systems (AWACS), and tankers—flew several missions over the northern Bay of Bengal working out interoperability issues in large force engagements over maritime spaces, among other exercises.

Karwar, on India's western coast, offers similar potential to locate an IBG (West) within the umbrella of the Maritime Command. With infrastructure associated with Project Seabird that includes an airfield under construction, Karwar is ideally suited to support a carrier battle group with land and aerial components with a primarily OOAC role.

The advantage of these two formations would be that they would serve as the nodal units for any kind of interoperability mechanisms or joint exercises with partner countries. For example, all OOAC training with US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Australia would be the responsibility of the ANC, while the Karwar battle group would assume responsibility of interoperability with US Central Command (CENTCOM), the Bahrain-based US Fifth Fleet, the United Kingdom, France, Oman, and other partner littorals in the region—such as the Maldives, Seychelles, and so forth.

Some preconditions for the operationalization of these structures would be the rationalization of assets from the Maritime Command or from the existing Eastern, Southern, and Western Naval Commands; allocation of fighter squadrons from existing resources; and creation of an OOAC division with a complement of

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Pushing Boundaries

National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) elements to create a broad-spectrum force that is capable of more than just war fighting. There could be some resistance from individual services to release resources to the OOAC command and battle group. However, the creation of these two battle groups along with command and control of joint structures involving space, cyber, and special forces could significantly empower the CDS, who also holds the post of chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, to emerge as a single-point advisor to the political establishment on matters related to the Indian military. Also of significance is that India’s recent joining of the Basic Exchange Cooperation (BECA) regime allows it to become a fully integrated partner with Western armed forces such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.70

Challenges to Transformation

Transformation initiatives in large organizations, including the military, are fraught with numerous obstacles and challenges, and this concluding section addresses some of those that will impact the Indo-Pacific. Many of the accompanying suggestions are prognostic and not prescriptive and must be considered so.

Despite some skepticism over changes in procedural, administrative, and mundane disciplinary aspects of functioning in ANC, there is considerable momentum in the generation of fresh ideas to exploit its operational potential.71 Joint structures will also need to be recalibrated or renamed to reflect synergy. Existing structures such as the Advanced Headquarters or Maritime Air Operations Centre (MAO) will need to be fused and renamed as Joint Force Headquarters and play an increasing role in the operational planning process as against the current top-down planning process that flows down from Service HQs.

The IN will have to expand its operational doctrine to factor in an amalgamation of carrier operations into the operational tasking of the proposed ANC Battle Group and the Karwar Battle Group. It is highly possible that the INS Vikramaditya will have its initial home at Karwar, with the possibility of the IN’s second carrier being based on the eastern seaboard until the ANC is ready to base it. However, until that happens, the Vikramaditya will be a busy warship as it

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70 Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) is a protocol agreement between the United States and its partners/allies that ensures unconditional sharing of intelligence, satellite data and all other operational inputs that offer enhanced multi-domain awareness. Also see, Shubhajit Roy, “Explained: BECA, and the importance of 3 foundational pacts of India-US defence cooperation,” Indian Express, 3 November 2020, https://indianexpress.com/.

shuttles between India’s western and eastern seaboards. Identifying a division for OOAC will not pose much of a problem as the Secunderabad-based 54th Division can easily assume the operational responsibility and divest a brigade to the ANC and Karwar battle groups respectively, with one brigade as a reserve if the requirement for any follow-on forces emerges. However, ground mobility assets for these forces in terms of armored personnel carriers will need attention, as will the need for towed artillery.

With two large air bases already operational in the southern peninsula at Arkonam (IN) and Thanjavur (IAF), and satellite bases at Car Nicobar and Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the IAF and IN will find it quite easy to operate in the theater as long as resources are made available. While a few squadrons of the Su-30 MKI and Jaguar are already maritime-capable, with the former having conducted operations until the Sunda Straits during Exercise Gaganshakti, the bigger challenge will be to dedicate up to four squadrons for maritime strike/air defense roles with the two battle groups until the force levels of the IAF rise from the current 30 squadrons to 34–35 fighter squadrons. The IAF’s fifth-generation fighter acquisition must keep the Indo-Pacific security construct as a significant factor that will support interoperability with all countries that are a part of this growing partnership. In the interim period, squadrons will have to train with the two battle groups and multitask with operational commitments along the western and eastern sectors. The bigger challenge for the IAF will be to raise interoperability levels with the IN that will exploit the maximum ranges of these platforms and hone operational procedures with the P-8 I, all of which are on the right trajectory based on an analysis of air operations during Exercise Gaganshakti in 2018.72 Concurrently, there is a need for the IN’s MiG-29s to increase interoperability with IAF AWACS and refuellers. There is also a strong case for the IAF to reconcile to a maximum peak availability of 37 to 38 fighter squadrons over the next decade, considering the lead times that would mark all future acquisitions and the modest pace at which the light combat aircraft (LCA) is being inducted. There has been some convergence in the road map to integration with the services and MoD agreeing that the first step to integration will be the consolidation of the Strategic Forces Command, the ANC, and the creation of Cyber, Space and SF Commands.73 Instead, a leaner structure on the lines of the PLA’s Strategic Support Force can include cyber, information warfare, and space as one large integrated command with three verticals, while the SF will be

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72 Based on a discussion with an unnamed senior IAF officer on some major takeaways from the exercise.

distinct from airborne forces and comprise two elements with operational and strategic tasking. The strategic element can be formed with elements from all the three services, combined with the National Security Guard (NSG), which can easily be hived off from the Ministry of Home Affairs and amalgamated with the Strategic Forces command to create a leaner structure with two verticals comprising Nuclear Forces and Special Forces. The operational element of the Special Forces will be terrain-specific and separated from the airborne forces and allocated to various army-specific or integrated commands. However, it is felt that the IN’s Marine Commandos and IAF Guards can take on specific SF tasks for OOAC operations that will involve operations like sanitation and reconnaissance of amphibious landing areas, airfield protection, and aircraft controlling.

The Indian military has an inflated number of training establishments, and there is an urgent need to both rationalize and restructure them. Increased emphasis on joint and integrated training will provide the right focus and play a significant role in dismantling existing prejudices, foster interoperability, and even reduce wasteful expenditure. Much has already been written about how India’s vast continental-focused air force and army commands can be integrated into theater commands, and it is suggested that an incremental approach to integration is the best way forward for India’s military. However, if India is to be seriously considered as a leading power, it must step up its training with partner countries to include a joint exploitation of assets through interoperability and interchangeability. It has been more than two decades since India started conducting exercises with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Singapore, and Japan. Yet the scope of all exercises largely remains centered on single-service operations with only superficial inclusion of joint service maneuvers. Introspection will reveal that this is because of suboptimal integration of capabilities within India’s own joint war-fighting capability that causes some amount of diffidence when it comes to looking outward. For example, any COIN or urban counterterrorism operation in the West includes airpower, both kinetic and nonkinetic. India, however, has different templates when it comes to using offensive airpower in COIN and has very little experience of any integrated operations in urban terrain. These gaps need to be addressed while looking at likely OOAC, and it is quite possible that all tools will be employed in some contingencies. There is much ground to be covered if the force structures suggested above emerge as lynchpins of a new and energized Indian military that is truly capable of full-spectrum operations.

**Impact**

With India overtaking China as the world’s most-populous nation in a little more than a decade, while concurrently having the largest working-age population,
employment generation holds the key to societal harmony. If current trends are anything to go by, the Modi government’s initiatives to expand manufacturing, rejuvenate the agricultural sector, or translate its Skill India initiatives into jobs is still a work in progress. It makes immense sense, therefore, not to embark on any major downsizing initiatives until either jobs emerge in other sectors or there is a palpable commencement of aging in India’s population. Until then, large standing armed forces will not only ensure security but also maintain a sense of discipline within society. The associated revenue costs of pay and pensions are inescapable and must not weigh down capital acquisition. This implies that defense spending may have to move toward 2.5–3 percent of GDP to ensure adequate development of capability to match India’s growing geostrategic aspirations. A rightsized and not a downsized professional military can have a huge impact on the continued survival of Indian democracy in an unstable regional security environment.

It is expected that the process of devolution of operational responsibilities by the service chiefs will be slow and marked by fierce protection of turf, making India’s force structure look like a hybrid one. The appointment of a CDS has created a momentum in restructuring, which must be continued, as in the long run, the position must be responsible to Parliament for the operational orchestration of the armed forces as an instrument of the state. That would be a defining moment, as would be the sharing of power, responsibility, and accountability in the MoD and service headquarters between the military and bureaucracy.

Though a few scholars and think tanks have debated the inadequacy of India’s current force structure to prosecute a two-front operation and the myth of a two-front threat perception, the creation of flexible structures like the proposed battle groups offers some operational comfort. It will allow a leading power like India to be prepared for the worst-case scenario in an unstable geopolitical environment, even if it means an overkill of capability. Strategic competition with China, terrorism, narcotics, nuclear proliferation, population, and climate change directly impact the Indo-Pacific construct and call for enhanced collaborative strategies within the larger framework of the robust and expanding India–US Strategic Partnership. A transformed Indian military with wide-spectrum capabilities will offer Indian statecraft the space to operate autonomously for extended periods of time, with contributions from partners being a force multiplier and not a prerequisite. This would allow India to assert itself as more than just a regional power.

and emerge as a leading power that contributes to global stability by demonstrating resolve, intent, and capability across the spectrum of conflict.

Concluding Reflections

Any concluding discussion on the transformation of a nation’s primary instrument of force, its military, must inevitably reflect on the conflict milieu within which this transformation is envisaged. The renewed possibility of large-scale conventional wars without any abatement in the occurrence of limited wars and subconventional conflict in varied terrain, including vast maritime spaces under a nuclear shadow, seems to be the main template within which wars in the twenty-first century will be fought from an Indian perspective. These scenarios remain distinct possibilities if India continues to experience adversarial relationships across the spectrum of conflict with two powerful neighbors, China and Pakistan, accompanied by a host of continued internal fissures and cracks.

It is, however, the need for credible deterrence against external adversaries and the requirement to constantly plug internal cracks and fissures that drives India's need to maintain its continental posture and a large standing army of 1.2 million personnel. This posture may need decisive political intervention to change after widespread debate on whether there is indeed a case for reconfiguring the IA to face future security challenges. Similarly, the need to maintain a large navy and air force is more about deterrence, latent coercive capability, and support for expansion of interests and influence. Seeing what is currently unfolding in Europe where NATO and non-NATO countries, after years of cutting defense expenditure following the collapse of the Soviet Union, are now scrambling to rebuild conventional capability and raise defense budgets in the face of a resurgent Russia, India would do well to tinker with its force structure in all domains with caution—rightsizing and not downsizing is the need of the hour. Restructuring and progressive integration of the army, navy, and air force to meet contemporary challenges and pool capabilities with partners is an inescapable imperative that will force India to shed some of its dogmas regarding strategic autonomy and single-service architecture, particularly in domains like the Indo-Pacific, where its

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75 The author’s comfort with the term limited war emerged after a thought-provoking talk at the Changing Character of War program at Oxford by Prof. Dan Stoker, US Naval Postgraduate School, 23 January 2018. The talk was very provocatively titled “How to Think about Limited War (Without Limiting Your Thinking).”

principal adversary, China, is steaming ahead. Failure to do so will leave India open to sustained pressure on multiple fronts.

Writing in his prognostic book on war in the twenty-first century, *Deadly Scenarios*, Andrew Krepinevich, an accomplished American military scholar and futurist, asks some basic probing questions on transformation in the US military that fit well in this examination of dilemmas facing the Indian military: “What are the most pressing challenges that the military will face in the coming years? What kind of military will the US need to confront them? Is it similar to the one that exists today, or very different?”

Despite the almost 10 percent increase in the defense budget for 2022–23 and a continued push to promote indigenization, improve the ratio of combat forces to support personnel, and a continued search to reduce the revenue budget through short-term engagements such as the Agnipath scheme, which is a new recruitment program for the Indian armed forces, and increasing the retirement ages across the board for officers and other ranks, there is much that needs to be done to transform the Indian military Deepening partnerships and better leveraging the spin-offs of agreements such as COMCASA, LEMOA, and BECA for mutual benefit may be one way out for India to mitigate the growing power asymmetry vis-a-vis China in the face of the latter’s relentless military modernization.

There is a wide gap between rhetoric and conversion of policy into viable military strategy and capability development even in the current strategic environment. India, however, appears to be emerging from decades of diffidence with countries like the United States, recognizing that “it is a nation invested in the free and open order in the Indo-Pacific region and it is in the interests of the region that India plays an increasingly weighty role in the region.” It is exactly these uncertainties that India’s military must confront if it wants to emerge as the sword arm of Indian statecraft in its quest for leading power status.

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77 It must be emphasized here that the author has written in the past against “integration without understanding” and argued that integration must start from the top and only then will it trickle down. This is in consonance with suggestions from many committees, including the Kargil Review Committee, Group of Ministers Report, and Naresh Chandra Committee Report.


Pushing Boundaries

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