

# The First and Last Line of Defence

India's external security environment is shifting fast, and in a turbulent neighbourhood, its Army remains a key force of stability

India's national security paradigm is complex. At one level, it is beset with internal security challenges that either simmer (like Kashmir), before erupting with disturbing frequency, or which, like Sikkim, suddenly explode onto the national consciousness. The external threat – of an aggressive China on one side and a continually challenging Pakistan at the other – is no lesser. India's million-strong army is our last – and in the case of external challenge – the first line of defence. Today, land armies are transforming across the world, defence spending is accelerating in a world of rising fundamentalism and growing nationalism. Under a much more categorical government at the Centre, the choices India's defence establishment will make – on responses to intrusions or questioning of sovereignty by internal or external forces, on technology utilisation and global partnerships and on freedom and respect to India's armed forces – will define the quality and responsibility of response in the coming years.

## **THE CURRENT SECURITY ENVIRONMENT: MAJOR SHIFTS...**

### ***A pragmatic approach to national security***

The NDA government is more realistic than the UPA was in its approach to national security. Recent incidents in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), the North-Eastern states, and on the border with Bhutan and China, are indicative of a strong and robust leadership that is well aligned to ground realities.

**The NDA brings a very welcome pragmatism to its approach to national security. At the same time, it has been bold and decisive, and focused more strongly than the UPA did on defence**



Specifically, the Indian army's recent aggressive crackdown on militants in J&K is the right move – something that should have been done ten years ago. Even with China, the government's decision to deploy the army at the Doklam plateau and to block the Chinese army from capturing the area has sent the right message to India's adversaries.

### ***Media reporting that is in line with the national interest***

The Indian electronic media, often accused of showing deplorable insensitivity to the country's national security interests, now appears to be speaking in unison on such matters. This is a positive development for India, which faces both insurgencies and proxy wars that can never be won if the media adopts an adversarial role. However, there is still a fair amount of negative media rhetoric that needs to be handled with greater maturity.

### ***Decisive governance***

Decisive, assertive and action-oriented governance is visible in many spheres. A major instance of this is the surgical strikes in response to a terrorist attack on an army camp in Uri. Prime Minister Modi's refusal to attend a SAARC meeting in Pakistan shortly after the attack is reflective of a bold and decisive government working in the national interest.

### ***Greater focus on defence***

The current government openly acknowledges the need for modernising the armed forces. This is reflected in some of the key initiatives the government has undertaken, including the Make in India programme, and the fact that the Vice Chief of the Army has been authorised to procure defence equipment to address security challenges emanating from a hostile neighbourhood.

### ***Stronger alignment with global powers***

India is now aligning more closely with countries like the US, Japan and Israel. This is evident, for instance, in the recently concluded Malabar naval exercise, which saw the US, India, and – for the first time – Japan participate. This sends a strong message to China.

## **...AND KEY THREATS**

### ***Rising polarisation***

A serious danger to India's internal security is rising polarisation and a growing socio-ethnic divide. This is one contour of the environment that can be exploited in a big way by either



Pakistan or China. The instigation of communal violence and other kinds of political or social turmoil can create mass-scale polarisation, which must be carefully examined, and long-term measures should be put in place to counter such threats.

### **Youth radicalisation**

Lately, India has seen attempts of mass mobilisation on ideological lines. In the last 5-7 years, instances of religious intolerance and provocation have increased, most evidently in J&K. Fuelled by the 24x7 electronic and social media, this is creating an environment of insecurity and alienation. India's massive youth bulge poses a huge challenge. Faced with unemployment and underemployment, many may fall prey to radical ideologies. If this is not converted into a demographic dividend, the youth bulge could well become a demographic disaster.

### **Rising threats from hostile neighbours**

India faces two hostile neighbours, Pakistan and China, who cooperate with each other to threaten the country's security. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), is a serious threat to India's sovereignty. At the same time, an internal insurgency along Pakistan's western border has destabilised the country. Pakistan has launched an offensive on the so-called 'bad terrorists' (including the Taheek-e-Taliban) who attack its military, police, and civilians, but it allows

**P**olarisation, youth-radicalisation, and a restive North-East are key concerns, while externally, cyber-terrorism, and two hostile neighbours, will remain a challenge ■ ■ ■ ■

the 'good terrorists' (JeM, LeT) who attack India to freely operate.

India's border conflict with China is expected to linger. China claims 90,000 sq km in the eastern sector, 2,000 sq km in the central sector and 38,000 sq km in the region of Xinjiang. Areas handed over by Pakistan to China are also a cause of contention. Unlike the Line of Control (LOC) with Pakistan, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) that India has with China is not clearly demarcated. Varying interpretations about the LAC lead to numerous standoffs with China, and the most recent one, in the Doklam plateau, clearly indicates that, in the case of an India-Pakistan conflict, China will step in. While China has not attacked India post 1962, India should be prepared for a two-front capability.

### **The turbulent North-East**

Over the past few years, instances of insurgency in the North-Eastern have drastically come down. This

is on account of a lack of a strong ideology – either secessionist or separatist – behind such movements. At the same time, however, gun-running, human trafficking, currency counterfeiting, and other forms of criminal activity, have been on the rise. The situation is under control in most parts of the region, including Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura, but there are exceptions, such as parts of Nagaland, Northern Assam, and certain border areas in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

### **Threats to Indian islands**

India lacks the resources to manage its strategic island territories. To become a regional power, it needs to expand its strategic reach through its navy. However, a positive shift is happening at the policy level, and resultantly, the indigenous ship-building industry is picking up in a big way. Numerous PPP initiatives to build ships and submarines are also underway.

### **Rising cyber-attacks**

The majority of data breaches in an organisation are attributable to human error, as against IT vulnerabilities. Even the most advanced and state-of-the-art security controls can be circumvented if employees make such basic mistakes as opening an email attachment that they should not. Recent breaches of corporate and government networks highlight a severe lack of capability to monitor and proactively respond to attacks. India needs a dedicated, military-centric cyber defence and offence system that is capable of defending national networks, and at the same time, penetrating deep into the networks of adversaries when required. ■

*This article is based on discussions at IMA's 2017 Annual CEO Strategy Roundtable with General Bikram Singh, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, Former Chief of the Indian Army and Chairman Chiefs of Staff*