

*Swaran Singh*

## **HIGHER DIRECTION OF DEFENCE POLICY: 50 YEARS OF INDIA'S EXPERIENCE**

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Geography, civilisational ethos and the history of foreign invasions are the three important strands that have moulded the evolution of India's strategic thinking during the last 5,000 years. As regards its last 50 years, factors like the two world wars, formation of the United Nations and decolonisation on the one hand, and the pacifist leanings of India's freedom struggle followed by a violent partition, four inter-state wars and a trail of foreign sponsored insurgencies on the other, can be cited as more immediate determinants of India's defence policy planning. But what has made India's defence planning particularly an intense experience is the fact that despite transfer of power from the British being peaceful and gradual, until 1947 the Indian leadership had absolutely no first-hand experience in the higher direction of defence; nor any indigenous capacity, whatsoever, in design, manufacture and product support for its armed forces.

The British India did have a fairly sophisticated defence planning framework; but most of it had to be transformed (upside down) to suit the new Indian realities and expectations. And today, gauging through India's performance during these last five

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decades, except for the brief border skirmishes against the Chinese in 1962, India's higher direction has generally fared well, be it their (i) three wars against Pakistan, (ii) 23 UN Peacekeeping operations, (iii) internal security deployments, and (iv) more recently, their military operations in and at the request of neighbouring countries. As a result, therefore, despite its obvious disjunctions and *ad hocism* in certain aspects, all this makes it but natural to take a stance that India's higher direction of defence has not only stood the test of time, it also shows promise of being quite capable of meeting future challenges.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is also merit in arguments that India has had no strategic vision beyond the subcontinent, that it has not really learnt from its past mistakes and that it still does not have a clear cut declared National Defence Policy.<sup>2</sup> But in a way these contradictions only highlight an increasing awareness and interest in defence matters and it is in this context that as India celebrates the 50th anniversary of its independence, it is perhaps about time to take stock and put this defence policy planning in perspective as it has evolved during these last 50 years since independence.

## THE TRANSITION PHASE

To start with, the transition phase was marked with chaos and tragedies. The new leadership not only had to create new systems of higher direction but also to learn how to operate them. Moreover, they were expected to do so while in the middle of

1. Jasjit Singh, 'Defence Doctrine and Policy Planning in India', *Strategic Analysis* (New Delhi), Vol.xvi No.6, September 1993, p.643; K. Subrahmanyam, *Indian Security Perspective* (New Delhi: ACB Publishing House, 1982), pp.122-123.
2. Chris Smith, *India's Ad hoc Arsenal: Direction Or Drift In Defence Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1994), pp.221-224; George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay*, RAND Paper, R-4207-USDP, 1992, p.50; Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Standing Committee on Defence (1996-97) Eleventh Lok Sabha, Second Report (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, December 1996), p.2.

crises created by partition followed by communal violence, mass movement of populations, intransigence of princely states like Kashmir, Junagadh, Hyderabad and the first Indo-Pak war over Jammu & Kashmir. Their new visions were put to test even before they could be formulated. Also with the death of leaders like Subhash Bose (1946), Mahatma Gandhiji (1948) and Sardar Patel (1950), Jawaharlal Nehru remained the only undisputed leader of the monolithic Congress party and became the sole architect responsible for the formulation, interpretation and administration of India's defence policy for the next 17 years. It is here that with his western education, Gandhiji's support (read blessings) and his tremendous scholarship on India's history and culture that Nehru proved to be more than an ideal choice of a statesman who could blend existing British institutions with India's ethos. The success of his experiment can be judged from the fact that, despite all the ongoing protests and transformation that occurred during the last half-a-century, even today India's defence policy remains essentially tied to what has come to be known as the Nehruvian principles.

### THE BRITISH IMPERIAL LEGACIES

There was absolutely nothing Indian about the Defence of India until 1947. Contrary to its strategic culture that was based on the premise that "security came from peace rather than peace from security", the British rule in India had been "essentially a military rule."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this was also not like their system of governance at home where British armed forces functioned strictly under their elected civilian leadership in London. Whatever existed, therefore, was only an element of British Imperialism. In that respect, however, India constituted a critical

3. Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975), (reprint by Universal Book Stall, New Delhi, 1986), p.722; H.S. Bhatia, *Military History of British India, 1607-1947*, (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 1977), p.viii.

component of British Empire. The Commander-in-Chief of India, as a result, enjoyed a special status and had direct access to the Home Government in London. Especially, following the Curzon-Kitchner controversy, even Governors General/Viceroy's did not have full control over the Defence Department and it functioned virtually as "...a secret post office in the line between the military headquarters in India under the Commander-in-Chief... and the Secretary of State for India and the War Department in London."<sup>4</sup>

Indians, as a policy, were not allowed to go very high up in the ladder and, those who made exceptions, kept strictly away from crucial policy-making circles. The bias had been particularly strong against Indians in the armed forces.<sup>5</sup> Even when an Indian was finally inducted as the Army Member into the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1942, the Defence Department was bifurcated into the War Department under the Commander-in-Chief and the Defence Department under the Army Member, with latter being responsible for such lesser jobs as canteens, cantonments, stationary and accounts. Similarly, the armed forces that India inherited were not a nationalist revolutionary army. If anything, these had been an instrument of British Imperialist expansionism which included suppression of India's freedom struggle. Following the Mutiny of 1857, the British had reorganised Indian armed forces in such a way that it would not become an effective force without the command of British officership.<sup>6</sup>

4. S.S. Khera, *India's Defence Problem* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1968), p.292.

5. P.V.R. Rao, *Defence With Drift* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1970), p.100. Compared to the civil servants who had held high positions for over 25 years, despite fast promotions, Brigadier was the highest rank that an Indian did reach by 1947. For the next decade the British were still holding senior positions in Indian armed forces with Englishmen heading the Air Force till 31st March 1954 and Navy till 21st April 1958.

6. K.M. Panikkar, *Problems of Indian Defence* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1960), p.27.

On the positive side, India's leaders also inherited ideas and institutions of the British parliamentary democracy which included principles like supremacy of civilian leadership and an apolitical nature of armed forces, both of which were to become an integral part of independent India's defence policy planning.<sup>7</sup> Besides, two centuries of the British rule had also generated many other stimulants like the English language, the printing press, the railways, few ordnance and steel factories etc. which facilitated the rise of national consciousness amongst various regions of India's civilisational state. But more than these, it was the unique manner of peaceful and gradual transfer of power that provided the proper background for the evolution of India's higher direction of defence policy.

#### THE INDIANISATION PROCESS

The first major thrust towards Indianisation of defence had come with the sudden expansion of the British Indian armed forces during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> Later, with the formation of the Interim Government on 2nd September 1946, the Defence Member (Sardar Baldev Singh) became the first civilian to head the Defence establishment and the Commander-in-Chief (Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck) was placed under him. The

7. K. Subrahmanyam, 'Commentary: Evolution of Defence Planning in India', in Stephanie G. Neuman (ed.), *Defence Planning in Less Developed Countries* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1980), p.127.
8. A.L. Venkateswaran, *Defence Organisation in India* (New Delhi: Government of India, Publication Division, 1967), pp.29,31; also Maharaj K. Chopra, *India: The Search for Power* (New Delhi: Lalvani Publishing House, 1969), p.217. Indianisation had become inevitable for two reasons. One, whereas in 1938, total number of officers (both English and Indian) was only 4,500, during the peak period of World War II their number reached over 50,000. Similarly, Defence Department had increased strength from 99 to 319. Secondly, on promise of the British considering devolution of power, Indians had actively supported the British war effort and over 2.5 million Indian troops had fought abroad as part of Allied forces.

Defence Member later became the Chairman of the Defence Member's Council (DMC) and part of the Joint Defence Council (JDC) which, till June 1948, took the most difficult decisions on the partition of Indian armed forces. Voluntary retirement of large number of British officers was also a factor that necessitated the promotion of comparatively junior officers to higher positions.<sup>9</sup> To give one example, Air Chief Marshal Subroto Mukherjee had only 21 years of service when he became the first Indian to be Chief of Air Staff on 1st April, 1954. The Indian civil servants, by comparison, had the advantage of having already worked at much higher positions and were quickly moved to man the crucial defence policy-making positions.<sup>10</sup>

Surely, these newly promoted Indian civil servants and military generals had little experience and knowledge in higher direction of defence. Even the Indian National Congress (INC) leaders, who were clearly marked to take over country's governance and had so meticulously evolved their foreign policy world view during those last years of freedom struggle, never carried out any serious debate on defence matters except for making occasional references.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the British example and advice, especially from Lord Mountbatten and his higher defence organisation advisor Lord Ismay, played a decisive role in the evolution of India's higher direction of defence.<sup>12</sup> Jawaharlal

9. A. Balakrishnan Nair, *Facets of Indian Defence* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Ltd., 1983), p.3; K.M. Panikkar, *Problem of Indian Defence*, p.33.
10. Though it was only in 1938 that an Indian was appointed (as under secretary) in the Defence Department, another Indian became Additional Secretary in 1941 and soon Chandulal Trivedi (an Indian ICS) was appointed as Secretary to the Defence Department in July 1942 and held the post till January 1946.
11. Chris Smith, *India's Ad Hoc Arsenal*, p.44. This had its reasons in the following: (i) INC's pacifist leanings, (ii) Confidence in India's natural frontiers, (iii) Pakistan was still not there, and (iv) Tibet was an independent friendly country and relations with China limited.
12. Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha, *Higher Defence Organisation* (USI National Security Lecture series), (New Delhi: United Services Institute of India, 1991), p.21; A.L. Venkateswaran, *Defence Organisation in India*, p.89.

Nehru had commissioned Wansborough Jones in 1946 to undertake a study on the scientific and organisational measures required to make India a self-supporting defence entity. The study was the first ever document on India's defence policy and it outlined four central roles for the Indian armed forces: (1) to secure land frontiers against raids from border tribes or from attack by a second class army, (2) to support civil power, (3) to provide a small expeditionary force capable of protecting India's regional interests, and (4) with available resources to develop a force capable of taking the field in a first class war.<sup>13</sup> But this was soon found to be far removed from Indian ethos and culture. The new leadership under Nehru had no "regional" ambitions nor any vision of preparing for a "first-class" war and Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Patel, had already declared that Internal Defence shall no longer be the responsibility of the armed forces.<sup>14</sup> In 1948, British physicist, P.M.S. Blackett, was commissioned to prepare a report on how India could "best cut her defence coat according to her scientific, financial and industrial cloth".<sup>15</sup> But around the time of completing his report, creation of Pakistan (1947), occupation of Jammu & Kashmir by Pakistan (1948), and military occupation of Tibet by China (1950) had completely transformed India's external environment in terms of defence planning. Besides, the division of the British Indian defence establishment into two national armies had left behind depleted, unbalanced and dislocated units, which was partly responsible for making India the number one enemy for Pakistan. From the late 1950s China was also added to the list of India's major security concerns. Thus, being unable to find any quick-fix solutions, the new leadership soon resorted to learning from India's own strategic ethos and experience.

13. Chris Smith, *India's Ad Hoc Arsenal*, p.49.

14. S.S. Khera, *India's Defence Problem*, p.43.

15. cf. P.M.S. Blackett, *Scientific Problem of Defence in Relations to the Indian Armed Forces: A Report to the Hon'ble Defence Minister* (New Delhi: 10 September, 1948), p.2-3.

## EVOLVING THE STRATEGIC CULTURE

As observed in the British parliamentary democracy, principles like primacy of politics, apolitical nature of armed forces, self-reliance, and use of force only as a weapon of last resort had also been central elements of India's own history and culture. The *Manusmrities* had visualised Indian society as loosely divided into four basic *varnas* and here the warriors group (Kshatriya) always took pride in keeping away from Palace politics (intrigues) and greatly valued qualities of valour, loyalty and truthfulness. In the conduct of inter-state relations they prescribed four political devices, namely: (i) conciliation or diplomacy, or "sama", (ii) concessions or gifts, or "dana" (iii) sowing dissension, or "bheda", and (iv) war or use of force, or "danda", in that order of merit.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, at more popular level, the epic of Mahabharata clearly projects how primacy of politics was a supreme value and how use of force was the only weapon of last resort. Chanakya's *Arthashastra* was another great treatise on statecraft. Similarly, the successive generations of Aryans, Mongols, Muslims, French and British, until Gandhiji's doctrine of non-violence, had their own contributions in the making of India's strategic culture. The new leadership felt obviously far more comfortable in evolving their higher direction of defence based on these Indian values and systems. In fact, work in this direction had already started with the formation of Interim Government in 1946.

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16. Nagendra Singh, *The Theory of Force and Organisation of Defence in India's Constitutional History* (New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p.33; also Nagendra Singh, *India and International Law* (Volume One: Ancient and Medieval), (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1973); and Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985). Manusmrities (Code of Manu) are one of the many ancient Shastras (treatises) and here *varnas* meant social groupings based on their functions. Brahmanas were scholars, Kshatriyas were warriors, Vaishyas were traders, and Sudras were people who did other menial jobs.



## Primacy of Politics

Indian tradition of democracy, Gandhiji's non-violence, general aversion towards British India's armed forces and the military takeovers in many of the newly independent developing countries were factors responsible for making 'primacy of politics' as the very essence of the new leadership's strategic vision. And here, supremacy of civilian leadership and the apolitical character of armed forces were only two facets of the same coin. To obtain this principle the highest mandate, relevant provisions were incorporated into the new Constitution. Article 53 clearly provides that the head (President) of the Indian republic shall be the Supreme Commander of the Indian armed forces. Besides, in section IV on the Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 51 lays down broad directions for Promotion of International Peace and Security, thereby exhorting restraint in the use of military power. Acting in the name of President, the Cabinet Committee on Defence (DCC) became the highest decision-making body with regard to laying down the broad national aims, so that an appropriate military strategy could be devised, in consonance with national resources that were to be mobilised towards achieving those national objectives.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the heads of three Services who were to be in attendance, the committee was intended to be completely informal and comprised of most political heavy-weights in the ruling party.<sup>18</sup> But by mid-1950s the DCC gradually fell into disuse partly because the prospects of another war were perceived to be remote.<sup>19</sup> Later, the DCC was re-activated as the Emergency Committee of Cabinet (ECC) in

17. Ravi Kaul, *India's Strategic Spectrum* (Allahabad: Chanakya Publishing House, 1969), p.137.

18. Air Marshal P.C. Lal, 'Higher Defence Organisation', in *Defence of India*, (Press Institute of India, seminar proceedings), (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1969), p.76. For example, during Nehru's time, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad was always part of it no matter what portfolio he held.

19. Raju G.C. Thomas, 'Defence Planning in India', Stephanie G. Neuman (ed.), *Defence Planning in less Developed States*, p.249.

1962 which was replaced in 1967 by a more generic forum called the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA), which has continued to be the fountainhead of India's defence policy since then. As a result, the highest interface between the military leadership and the political executive came to be confined to the Defence Minister's Committee (DMC) with the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC) now acting as Union Cabinet's highest professional consultant on defence matters presenting them with written "single-point" advice.

To recall, the Commander-in-Chief during the British times used to be a parallel power centre, almost as powerful as the Viceroy himself.<sup>20</sup> The position of the Commander-in-Chief of India was abolished on 15 August 1947 and from June 1948 three separate heads for the Army, Navy and Air Force came to be known as Commanders-in-Chief and Chiefs of Staff. Later, their designation of C-in-C was also abolished in 1954.<sup>21</sup> Despite Nehru's assurances in the Parliament, the British system of "Boards" and "Councils" was never implemented and there continues to be strong aversion to creating the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) which, most think, carries too much power and suits only powerful military establishments.<sup>22</sup> But this entire exercise had its pitfalls too. The civilian supremacy gradually took a new shape of civil servants gaining a greater say, thus increasing the gulf between the political executive and the military leadership resulting in lack of coordination and poor performance during the 1962 Sino-Indian war and later at the Operation Bluestar at the

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20. N. Kunju, *Indian Army: A Grassroots Review* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1991), p.89.

21. Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: The Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.170; also A.L. Venkateswaran, *Defence Organisation in India*, p. 139-40.

22. Lt. Gen. A.M. Vohra (Retd.), 'Establish NSC and Restructure MOD', *USI Journal*, Vol. cxxii No.509, (July-September 1992), p.158; Lt. Gen. S.K. Sinha (Retd.), 'Chinks in the armour', *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 11 January, 1997.

Golden Temple (1984) and in peacekeeping operations in Sri Lanka (1987-1991).<sup>23</sup> Even today, in contrast to the ancient Indian system where the head of armed forces was always part of King's Council of ministers (though never the prime minister) as also unlike the current British arrangements, the Indian Ministry of Defence remains fully controlled by the general civil service while the armed forces headquarters have not been integrated with the Government. Meanwhile, various experiments have been made in evolving a specialised apex organisation for dealing with national security issues - like Committee on Defence Planning (1978), Policy Advisory Group (1986), National Security Council (1990) - but nothing yet has been able to replace this informal arrangement of working through the political culture of committee system.

### **Self Reliance in Defence**

In consonance with India's choice of non-alignment in foreign affairs, mixed economy for social development, and democracy based on universal adult franchise as its political system, the philosophy of self-reliance was another central tenet of the new leadership's strategic vision.<sup>24</sup> In defence, it translated itself into a three pronged methodology, namely, of (i) expanding its indigenous defence production, (ii) diversification of India's defence suppliers, and (iii) evolving a system of license production and joint ventures to obtain technology transfers from industrialised countries. But obtaining technology transfers, India's non-aligned self-reliance presented the following four difficulties: (i) minimum resources must be spent on defence, (ii) one could not get exactly the equipment one wanted, (iii) in time

23. Shekhar Gupta, **India Redefines its Role**, *Adelphi Paper 293* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for IISS, 1995), p.34.

24. K. Subrahmanyam, *Defence and Development* (New Delhi: The Minerva Associates, 1973), p.12.

of war the sources may well dry up, and (iv) initial purchases to be complete with spares (often larger than needed) as also setting up maintenance facilities, all of which were extremely expensive.<sup>25</sup> Besides, purchases from various sources soon resulted in proliferation of varieties, causing headaches in terms of tactics and training. Also the low defence allocations during the first 15 years (average 1.8 per cent of GDP) did not match with these heavy demands of India's strictly non-aligned self-reliance. Amongst others, these limitations were responsible for making amends in India's strategic thinking in the late 1960s, thus bringing New Delhi closer to Moscow.<sup>26</sup>

India, however, never restricted its arms supplies to Moscow. Besides, India expanded its indigenous defence production. Despite all the delays and not many breakthroughs, India did achieve some success especially in creating a network of license production facilities and it emerged virtually self-sufficient in various aspects of small arms and ammunition.<sup>27</sup> Starting from the British Vampire frontline fighter, Leander-class frigates and Orpheus engines (for HF-24) to Soviet MiG series and then MBTs from T-55 to T-72, license production soon emerged as the backbone of India's self-reliance in defence. Also apart from major strides in space and nuclear technologies during the 1970s, greater political thrust was provided to defence research and development during the mid-1980s which has brought success to important programmes like the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme, MBT Arjun, Light Combat Aircraft,

25. General J.N. Chaudhri, 'Defence Strategy', in *Defence of India*, p.4.

26. Besides, unlike offers from western countries, this involved transfer of state-of-art technologies, which came without "political strings" but had long-term low-interest credits which were given on rupee-rouble basis.

27. For details, see, Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *The Story of Defence (1947-1972)*, (New Delhi, 15 August, 1972); also Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Annual Report, for various years.

Advanced Light Helicopter, Delhi and Godavari-class frigates and so on. And today, the greatest evidence of the success of India's self-reliance lies in the fact that despite India currently having over 70 per cent of its equipment of Soviet-origin, except for a brief period of adjustment, the collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1991 did not create any major crises with regard to the service, supply and spares for the Indian armed forces.

### **Armed Forces in Nation-building**

And finally, nothing perhaps has been as unique in the new Indian strategic vision as their experiment in making defence forces not only a guarantor of peace but also locomotive of national reconstruction. This incarnation under the rubric of "Aid to civil power" obtained the armed forces a much wider role in areas like (i) maintenance of law and order, (ii) counter-insurgency operations, and (iii) in dealing with intermittent natural and man-made calamities. Apart from India's geographical vastness that pressed forward such a unique vision, this new role was brought to light by the chaos of partition where armed forces were the only organised element of government that could, and were, called upon to handle various disaster relief functions. Besides, the vast size and geography of India had their own contribution. Food, equipment and other logistics had to be provided for troops operating from Thar desert to tropical terrain of India's northeast, at minus 50 degree Celsius temperatures at high altitude battlefield like Siachen Glacier (at 18,000 feet height) as also for those who defend India's 7,500 kilometre long coastline. This, in turn, created rare infrastructure facilitating the development of India's much neglected remote regions. This holistic approach was part of Nehru's emphasis on "scientific temper" for which a nodal agency, the Defence Science Organisation (DSO) was set up in 1948. Later, in 1954, it was reorganised as the Defence Research and Development

Organisation (DRDO) which today has a network of 50 research establishments which, once again, have made important contribution in integrating the defence to the civil society.

But what particularly stands out in armed forces' intangible contribution towards national reconstruction is their role in being a model of social integration; something that remains so vital for the very survival of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual, civilisational nation-state like India. While the British had created a superstructure that highlighted India's social and ethnic divisions, this new experiment was soon to transform the armed forces into the greatest symbol of the unified new Indian nation-state. Not only all Royal prefixes, titles, awards, badges were replaced by new Indian names and titles but a new unified officers cadre was created where caste or ethnic origins had no relevance. Even for men, though many units/regiments continued with their ethnic formations (only in name), an overarching Indian nationalism soon became a common thread. As a result, despite occasional post-retirement clamour for more allowances or for better equipment, armed forces still remain India's most important symbol of values like discipline, sacrifice and patriotism amongst Indian populace.<sup>28</sup> Not for nothing, had Nehru defined defence as a sum total of the military preparedness, the spirit of the people, and the industrial potential of the country, something that has since continued to be the guiding principle for India's defence planning even in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup>

## DEFENCE POLICY OPTIONS

Based on this larger Indian ethos and culture, principles like primacy of politics, apolitical nature of armed forces, self-reliance

28. Lt. Gen. (Dr.) M.L. Chibber (Retd.), *Soldier's Role in National Integration* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1986), p. 213; General V.N. Sharma, 'India's Defence Forces: Building the Sinews of a Nation', *USI Journal*, Vol.cxxiv No.518, October-December 1994, pp.441-442.

29. K. Subrahmanyam, *Indian Security Perspective* (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1982), p.134.

and self-restraint have come to be the enduring central tenets of India's defence policy-making since independence. Nevertheless, the changing security environment, both inside and around India, have occasionally resulted in appeals for change; asking policy-makers to shed this so-called high moral approach of the Nehruvian era. At least at the level of policy pronouncements, these last two decades have witnessed a marked trend towards asserting greater pragmatism. Starting from India's resounding military victory in the third Indo-Pak war and its relief and rescue operations in Sri Lanka in 1971 followed by its peaceful nuclear explosion in 1974, a pro-active regional role did become the hallmark of defence policy under Indira-Rajiv regimes which culminated in India's second peacekeeping operation in Sri Lanka (1987-1991) and a short operation in the Maldives (1988). But soon, the lack of charismatic leadership, disappearance of a strong trusted ally (former Soviet Union) and the economic crises of the early 1990s, have since resulted in making this pro-active defence policy lose its charm to pro-active economic diplomacy. But this only marks another little swing by the pendulum of India's traditional defensive-defence doctrine which keeps moving in-between India's larger strategies of long-term idealism and short-term pragmatism.<sup>30</sup>

### **Doctrine of Defensive-Defence**

Historically, though, the cohesiveness of India's inhabitants, the richness of resources in its fertile Gangetic plains and an access to open seas made Indian civilisation non-expansionist and non-aggressive by vision India has gradually become far more assertive within the subcontinent.<sup>31</sup> But as for the last 50 years,

30. Jasjit Singh, 'Conflict Prevention and Management: The Indian Way' in Jasjit Singh (ed.), *Asian Strategic Review 1995-1996* (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies & Analyses, December 1996), p.25.

31. George K. Tanham, *Indian Strategic Thought*, p.54-55.

this becoming assertive has only been part of its evolution and was not inherent in Nehru's vision of defensive-defence. One important indicator of his non-militaristic approach lies in that even today defence allocations continue to be a non-plan expenditure. In fact, for long time after independence India's economic experts use to project defence and development as being alternative choices. It was not until India had fought three wars between 1962-1971 that the Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence for 1971-72 became the first official document to declare that the nation's development can not go smoothly forward unless its security was ensured.<sup>32</sup> Still, during all wars, the doctrine of defensive-defence resulted in political executive constraining military's objectives. It even resulted in political leadership giving up all military gains (territories and prisoners of war) in the hope of evolving lasting solutions in tune with the philosophy of seeking "security-in-peace". To that extent, even today Indian leadership has continue to prefer restraint and, despite its professed evidence on foreign involvement in various insurgencies within India, it has not allowed armed forces to strike terrorist' sanctuaries and training camps beyond India's borders. To quote the Ministry of Defence, India's defence policy since independence has been articulated in following terms:

That our military capability is to be directed to ensuring the defence of the national territory over land, sea, and air encompassing among others the inviolability of our land borders, island territories, offshore assets and our maritime trade routes. Government have repeatedly made it clear that it is not our objective to influence/interfere/dominate region on the basis of military strength.<sup>33</sup>

32. K. Subrahmanyam, *Defence and Development*, p.1.

33. Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Tenth Lok Sabha, Standing Committee on Defence (Sixth Report), Defence Policy, Planning and Management, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, March 1996), p.1.



But the 1990s have once again witnessed clamour for more assertive doctrines with emphasis on pro-active tactics like seeking engagement and by evolving confidence building measures to thereby further strengthen traditional measures of dissuasion and deterrence. The end of the Cold War era, apart from disturbing existing equations, has resulted in making non-proliferation of missiles and nuclear weapons as priority number for Western powers thus igniting rethinking on these issues. Especially, following the Western blitzkrieg during the Persian Gulf War (1991), two Parliamentary committees in India - the Estimates Committee and the Standing Committee on Defence - have come out with detailed reports to show how this country still does not have "a clearly articulated and integrated defence policy."<sup>34</sup> The Bhartiya Janata Party has taken the issue to the larger public making defence policy, for the first time, an agenda for general election (1996). All this prompted the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to make a statement in Parliament on 16 May 1995 which perhaps is the most definitive statement made ever on India's defence policy and is worth quoting here verbatim:

We do not have a document called India's National Defence Policy. But we have got several guidelines which are followed, strictly followed, and observed and those can be summed up as follows: 1) Defence of National Territory over land, sea and air encompassing among other the inviolability of our land borders, island territories, offshore assets and our maritime trade routes; 2) To secure an internal environment whereby our Nation

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34. Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Tenth Lok Sabha, Estimates Committee 1992-93, (Nineteenth Report), Defence Force Levels, Manpower Management and Policy, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariate, August 1992), p.3  
Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Tenth Lok Sabha, Standing Committee on Defence (Sixth Report), p.6.

State is insured against any threats to its unity or progress on the basis of religion, language, ethnicity or socio-economic dissonance; 3) To be able to exercise a degree of influence over the nations in our immediate neighbourhood to promote harmonious relationships in tune with our national interests; 4) To be able to effectively contribute towards regional and international stability and to possess an effective out-of-the-country contingency capability to prevent destabilisation of the small nations in our immediate neighbourhood that could have adverse security implications for us. This policy is not merely rigid in the sense that it has been written down, but these are the guidelines, these are the objectives, these are the matters which are always kept in view while conducting our Defence Policy. I think no more explanation or elaboration is needed than this.<sup>35</sup>

At face value, it appears to be a call for the come back of an activist's role that had marked India's defence policy under Indira-Rajiv regimes. But looking at the current ground realities para 3 and 4 appear to be far too ambitious to say the least. Moreover, what constitutes India's "immediate neighbourhood", or how will its limited "contingency capability" prevent destabilisation, or whether India will intervene if not invited, remains completely unclear. And, with its declining defence allocations for the last ten years (1987-1996), shortage of 13,000 army officers and with most of defence equipment now overdue for upgradation/retirement, such a role does not appear to be a feasible proposition. The naval arm, which should be the focus of any expansionist power projection, has been the one most neglected during the 1990s. The last CCPA sanction for indigenous warship construction was given in 1986, and against

35. Cited in Jaswant Singh, *National Security: An Outline of Our Concerns*, *Lancer Paper 7* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 1996), pp.59-60.

Navy's projected demand for Rs. 44.64 billion for modernisation during 1995-96, only Rs. 18.53 billion was provided in the budget.<sup>36</sup> Also much of what gets sanctioned may not stand scrutiny of any kind. In 1989, for example, the Corporate Review had resulted in the closure of 618 DRDO projects out of a total of 989.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, any possibility of acting as regional hegemon remains wholly out-of-character given the defensive orientation and morally-premised nature of India's earlier responses to regional crises and, therefore, must be dismissed as pure rhetoric enunciated without appreciating its implications.<sup>38</sup> Besides, the statement says nothing on nuclear and missile options or on India's internal security deployments which remain responsible for much of the confusion about India's defence policy.

### **Nuclear and Missile Policies**

Despite much rhetoric, Indian nuclear and missile policies remain very much in tune with India's ethos. India presents a unique example where both nuclear and missile capabilities have been purely a spin-off from civilian research programmes. Despite gradual deterioration of its security environment (with spread of nuclear and missiles technologies in), India has kept restraint and not crossed the threshold of so-called technology demonstrators. Countries like France, United Kingdom, South Africa had weaponised under far lesser security complications.

As for India, apart from continued pressures the Western countries to cap-freeze-and-eliminate India's nuclear and missile

36. Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Tenth Lok Sabha, Standing Committee on Defence, Seventh Report, Demands for Grants 1995-96, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, March 1996), p.3, 13.
37. Government of India, Ministry of Defence, Tenth Lok Sabha, Standing Committee on Defence, Eighth Report, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, March 1996), p.1.
38. P.R. Chari, 'Defence Policy Formulation: The Indian Experience', *Indian Defence Review*, Vol.11 No.1 (January-March 1996), p.30-31.

capabilities, it is the Chinese defence modernisation and its linkage with India's neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Myanmar that poses an immediate challenge to India's peace and security. As a result, despite continued reluctance at the official level, there has been a great deal of domestic pressure for integrating these capabilities into the overall defence policy posture. To quote from the Ministry of Defence Annual Report for 1996-97, "just as global pressures on India's nuclear [and missile] option have been growing", a consensus seems to be emerging towards an opinion that "adequate defensive measures are inescapable, much as India may have wished otherwise."<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, disarmament, apart from being a high moral principle of India's foreign policy, continues to be the central element of its hard-headed strategic priorities. India's security interests are better served in an environment without missiles and nuclear weapons. But India remains opposed to all the partial and discriminatory arms control and non-proliferation regimes which, working under the rubric of disarmament, seek to protect the powerful. Especially, the increasing distrust amongst nuclear weapons powers on the merit of India's self-restraint - seen in their negotiations during the permanent extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the drafting of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and now the Fissile Material Control Treaty as also in whole lot of other technology denial regimes - has resulted in creating a backlash within India, strengthening the pro-weaponisation lobby. And here, the Bhartiya Janata Party made weaponisation an issue during the last general elections (1996) and it has returned to Parliament as the single largest party. Though it could not prove its majority on the floor of the house and right now sits as an opposition, it clearly underlines the swing this time being in favour of weaponisation policy.

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39. Government of India, Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1995-96*, p.2.

## Aid to Civil Power

And finally, "Aid to Civil Power" has also been an important responsibility for the armed forces, though with the focus on human rights, it has come to be strongly debated during the 1990s. Owing to India's size, diversity and colonial legacies, vested interests (both inside and outside) have always found it convenient to support secessionist activities as an instrument of settling their bilateral equations with New Delhi. It is this external factor in its internal insurgencies that has a bearing on India's defence policy for it has a direct correlation with the level of violence and the staying power of these insurgencies, thus making any accommodation difficult and pushing for repeated use of armed forces. In the last ten years alone, security forces have captured over 25,000 guns and nearly 2.5 million pieces of ammunition from the insurgents which clearly shows the level of funding and training involved.<sup>40</sup> China and Burma, for example, had played a major role in sustaining insurgencies in India's northeast. The situation has come under control following New Delhi's improved ties with these countries.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, having failed in its three wars against India, Pakistan made this covert, low-cost low-intensity warfare as its major anti-India strategy since the late 1980s.<sup>42</sup>

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40. Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Department of Internal Security, States and Home, Annual Report 1995-96, p.116.

41. Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's Northeast* (New Delhi: Viking Publishers, 1994), p.101; N.K. Das, *Ethnic Identity, Ethnicity and Social Stratification in North-East India*, (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 1989), pp.243-45. Nagas were the first to initiate insurgency in 1956 followed by the Mizos in 1966, the Tripuris in 1978 and Assam since 1979.

42. Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, (New Delhi: Sage Publishers, 1991), pp.167-219; Riyaz Punjabi, 'Kashmir: The Bruised Identity' in Raju G.C. Thomas (ed.), *Perspectives on Kashmir: The Roots of Conflict in South Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p148. Both states have since obtained normalcy, with Punjab having popular elections in 1992 and 1997 and Kashmir having popular elections in 1996.

However, unlike their openness about military's involvement in times of natural disasters, successive governments have been less forthcoming in formally pronouncing a role for the armed forces in internal peacekeeping. The increasing Western campaigns on human-rights seems to be partly responsible. During British times, for example, Internal Defence was a responsibility for the armed forces. This was seen in terms of (a) maintaining law and order and (b) protecting railways and other means of communication necessary for war operations.<sup>43</sup> But that colonial experience resulted in setting a bad example and Sardar Patel made it clear that in independent India Internal Defence will not be the subject for the armed forces, and he placed it under the responsibility of provincial governments to be overseen by the Union Interior Minister. But the armed forces had to be repeatedly called in and there have been incidents when armed forces were provoked to commit excesses. Still, compared to the police and para-military formations, military deployments have always been used only exceptionally. Even in worst case scenario of being deployed, the armed forces have played only a supportive role in cordoning areas while the police and para-military forces carry out search and sanitising operations to flush out the insurgents.<sup>44</sup> But in the end, apart from these external factors, the absence of war during the last 26 years has also been partly responsible for shifting the focus to military's internal duties. Today, these have come to be the only field operations where armed forces are seen as functioning and, for many, it serves well to highlight this role to "save their turf" and to justify their demands for higher budgetary allocations.

43. Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Defence of India: Policy and Plans* (Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939-1945), (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1989), pp.47-49.

44. K.P.S. Gill, 'The Dangers Within: Internal Security Threats', in Bharat Karnad (ed.), *Future Imperilled: India's Security in the 1990s and Beyond* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1994), pp.130-131.

## CONCLUSION

Indian defence policy has been aptly described as an amalgam of "unsatisfactory compromises between what was politically desirable, financially possible and militarily prudent."<sup>45</sup> But despite these obvious limitations, except for the 1962 India-China war, neither financial allocations nor armed forces performance have ever allowed any noticeable let down. More important, the higher direction from the political executive, both in formulation and implementation of defence policy, has not only stayed within the bounds of Indian strategic ethos but also proved successful in updating India's strategic vision to successfully cope with the changing realities. There are indications that leadership has learnt many lessons and successfully effected a gradual shift towards greater pragmatism. One noticeable diversion since the late 1960s was that the top level bureaucracy had become rather influential offering itself as a buffer between the political executive and the military leadership. The 1990s have witnessed this gap being narrowed by expanding public debate on these issues. Especially, the Parliamentary committees have taken upon themselves this new role of becoming far more assertive in the making of defence policy. Also, over the years, the middle rung of members from intelligence agencies, service officers, civil servants and strategic experts have become far more focused and evolved a wider network that today provides influential input and ensures continuity in defence policy. All this has also resulted in bringing the debates to the larger audience in the Indian masses who have become increasingly interested in various aspects of defence thinking and capabilities. This only further reinforces the principle of accountability of the political executive which ensures that, in future, India's higher direction of defence be only far more in tune with ground realities and bring about greater synchronisation between India's ambitions, necessities and its actual capabilities.

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45. Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security: Defence Policies, 1947-1965* (Dehradun: EBO Publishing and Distributors Co, 1967), p.211.