Conventional Security Threats to Bangladesh in the 21st Century: The Role of the Armed Forces

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Introduction

1. Crystal gazing into the distant future is not possible; forecasts tend to get inaccurate with time. This paper will, therefore, cover the first decade into the twenty-first century. I shall discuss conventional threat scenario, including the emerging regional threats. I shall argue that a credible defence force ensures internal and external peace, thus it contributes towards continued prosperity and wellbeing. I shall point out how regional defence cooperation among neighbours are not only desirable, but those are essential to combat new threats that I visualise will emerge in the future. Finally, I shall recommend organisational and functional changes in the military so that they could best face the evolving threats.

2. This paper seeks to highlight conventional security threats to Bangladesh in the next decade and suggests how best the armed forces could combat those threats.

Global Scene

3. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the end of the Cold War did not lessen the chances of war; in fact, we have seen more of them. Although direct land invasion and occupation of one country by another is less likely, threat or actual use of armed forces to enforce national objective is still common. Countries are engaged in proxy war to weaken potential enemy. Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the danger of these weapons ending up in the hands of the terrorist organisations are increasing. While globalisation is bringing
The nations closer, we see growing ethnic, cultural and religious conflicts. Centrifugal and centripetal forces are working at the same time. Military forces are getting involved either directly in the conflict or through the UN and other bodies in the peace-enforcement or peacekeeping missions. While diplomats continue to seek peaceful resolution of conflicts, the military forces back the diplomatic effort by actual or threatened use of force.

Regional Scene

4. In South Asia, we are passing through a period of uncertainty and changes. India and Pakistan, two most important countries of the region, are still at loggerheads over Kashmir. Arms race between them has taken new dimension since nuclear explosions by both. Rise of religious extremism in both these countries is fueling the bitterness, and hindering peaceful resolution of mutual problems. Continued Indo-Pakistan rivalry is, in fact, negatively impacting on the process of regional cooperation in South Asia.

5. What would be the changes in the next decade? A pessimist would say that the arms race might accentuate, the militarists might precipitate a showdown that could result in a catastrophic Armageddon. Rising religious extremism in India and Pakistan could spill over into Bangladesh. If the movement for democracy in Myanmar turns more violent, the military junta might try to divert popular attention by fomenting trouble at the border. Large-scale exodus of the Rohingyas could trigger serious law and order situation for Bangladesh. There might be increasing unrest among various religious and ethnic minorities in the region. There might be increasing smuggling of weapons and subsequent transfer of these into the hands of criminals and anti-state elements. The drug scene is already hot. We are sitting between the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent. Bangladesh could become an important route of drug trafficking in the future. Overall, the physical security scene, both internally and externally, would seem pretty bleak to many.
6. On the other hand, an optimist could draw a brighter picture. He could argue that the good sense would prevail in India and Pakistan. They would decide to live as good neighbours and come to an understanding on Kashmir. The civil society in the region is demanding a peaceful atmosphere for the region. The business people are getting together more and more in regional cooperative ventures. The people to people contacts are increasing. The international pressure, coupled with domestic priorities, will probably force India and Pakistan to the negotiating table and we might then go ahead with forging, what we prefer to call, the SAARC* spirit. One could hope for a stable and democratic Myanmar emerging in the future and that they would be able to curb the drug trafficking. It is in our interest that peace prevails in the region and that democracy and social justice flourish. These will, however, remain pious thoughts unless there is a genuine desire among the politicians and social leaders of the region to look beyond tomorrow and into the future.

Conventional Security Threats to Bangladesh

7. An analysis of the global and regional scenario over the next decade will be the appropriate backdrop for studying the conventional security threats to Bangladesh.

8. Threats to the Physical Security. The primary role of the armed forces of Bangladesh, as indeed anywhere else in the world, is to provide physical security of the state from all enemies: external and internal. The military is an instrument of the state to achieve national objective. Our national objective as described in the preamble of our Constitution is, "to realise through the democratic process a socialist society free from exploitation - a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice - political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens." It is the duty of the armed forces to help government pursue this objective. In pursuance of this objective we may have to use violence, including the use of military forces. Bangladesh is committed to peaceful resolution of conflicts, but if diplomacy fails and we have to resort to violence, we must not waver. Let us now

SAARC stands for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
examine what are the likely conventional threats developing for Bangladesh over the next decade. A look at the map will reveal that India surrounds Bangladesh on three sides, and we have a narrow land boundary with Myanmar in the Southeast. The Bay of Bengal is in the South. Any invasion, however remote may be the possibility, can originate either from India or Myanmar. Fortunately, we do not have any serious dispute with either of them. Our land boundaries with both these countries are well demarcated. We do have a number of issues outstanding with both the neighbours, but the level of disagreement is on a very low key. It is highly unlikely that, over the next decade and beyond, there is a possibility of war or serious armed conflict between Bangladesh and either of these two countries.

9. **Outstanding Issues with the Neighbours.** Having said that, I must add that there are a number of issues with our neighbours that are of strategic importance to us. I shall discuss some of them now.

a. **The Water Sharing Problem.** The most vexing problem with India was the sharing of water of the Ganges. Given the goodwill on both sides, we solved this problem in 1996. The Ganges Water Treaty could be the basis for a negotiated settlement, in the future, of waters of all common rivers between Bangladesh and India. Water issue is of vital importance for the wellbeing of the people of Bangladesh. India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and eventually China, will have to work together to harness this great resource. Fresh water is going to be the scarcest resource in the next century and will be the cause of international tension and even war. If oil was the liquid gold in the twentieth century, fresh water will be the same in the coming century. From the security point of view, it is important that Bangladesh remains in a strong bargaining position at all time.
b. **Insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. (CHT)**

Another problem that often embittered the relations between India and Bangladesh was the insurgency problem in the CHT that went on for almost two decades. That has also been successfully negotiated and we are looking forward to a peaceful future in the CHT. Although the final settlement in the CHT was the outcome of a peaceful negotiation, military's role in the whole process is a very important one. It is the military pressure of the state that finally convinced the insurgents about the futility of their armed struggle and forced them to abandon insurgency and come to the negotiating table. If we did not have a strong military presence in the CHT, our bargaining position would have been very weak. Although peace has been restored in the CHT, the northeast Indian states bordering CHT remain in the grip of insurgency. Some of these insurgencies are going on since the partition of India and are unlikely to die down in the near future. It is of vital strategic interest to Bangladesh that we ensure that these insurgents do not take refuge in Bangladesh, and if they do we must have the military means to flush them out. We shall have to have a strong military presence in the area.

c. **Rohingya Issue and the Military Government in Myanmar.** The military government in Myanmar is keeping the country virtually cut-off from the rest of the world. The movement for democracy is being brutally suppressed. This is a volatile situation that we shall have to carefully watch for the future. In order to divert the public opinion at home, the Myanmar government might try a new 'push in' of the Rohingya refugees. Like many other ethnic groups of Myanmar, if the Rohingyas start a full-scale guerrilla war, we will feel its spillover effect in Bangladesh. It is in the strategic interest of Bangladesh that we, while maintaining good bilateral relations with the Government in Yangon, try to foster democracy in Myanmar with whatever leverage we have. A
democratic and strife-free Myanmar is the best guarantee we have for a peaceful border with that country.

d. **Demarcation of the Exclusive Economic Zone.** It was mentioned that the land boundary is well demarcated and we do not foresee any major problem there, but the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) between Bangladesh and Myanmar and Bangladesh and India are not yet demarcated. Large part of the Bay of Bengal remains unexplored; as such this problem is more or less dormant now. However, now that off-shore oil and gas deposits have been found and international companies are bidding frantically, we need to settle the EEZ question soon. In any future negotiation on the EEZ, our maritime capability will be a vital factor in staking our claim of the sea. The need to augment our military forces, especially the naval and maritime air forces, is intrinsically connected to our economic future.

10. **Internal Threats to the Security.** Along with these traditional threats I can foresee a number of threats emerging in this region that could keep our military forces engaged. Although I class them as internal threats, indeed those might keep our military busy in the future. I shall discuss some of them now.

a. **Insurgency.** Insurgency is a major security threat to the states of South Asia. Insurgencies have political roots and can only be solved politically, but military forces can bring pressure on the insurgents to come to terms with the political authority. Quite often military forces could not bring about the desired pressure because the insurgents had their sanctuaries across the border. The insurgents often drew their support from the neighbouring governments. Countries blamed each other for waging proxy wars. Counter-insurgency operations cause huge drain on the national economy, foreign investments shy away and relations between states deteriorate. Although we
are in the process of solving the CHT issues, insurgency in the NE hills of India will need careful monitoring by the security forces of Bangladesh.

b. **Terrorism.** Along with insurgency, there has been a sharp rise in terrorism, especially urban terrorism throughout South Asia. In fact, insurgency and terrorism go hand in hand and are often indistinguishable. The rise of Mafia-like international criminal organisations that operate across the region is a distinct possibility. These organised crime syndicates are far too strong to be tackled by ordinary law enforcement agencies. The armed forces will often have to assist in tracking down and suppressing the terrorists.

c. **Drug and Arms Trafficking.** Drug and arms trafficking are closely connected with insurgency and terrorism. In fact, quite often the insurgents themselves engage in drug business to pay for their arms. Drugs and arms are increasingly creeping into Bangladesh. It is destroying the very fabric of our society. These death-merchants have no border, have no ideology and no allegiance. Their only motive is to make profit at the people’s cost. If unchecked, they become threats to the very existence of lawful government and the civil society. Latin American states are vivid examples of what might be in store for us, unless we take these threats seriously. Today armed forces of many Latin American countries are fully engaged in combating the drug lords. The primary function of the US Southern Command is combating the drug traffic. The threat is very real for us in Bangladesh. We have to combine all our resources, civil and military, to combat this threat. Combating these emerging threats will demand regional and international cooperation between the armed forces of various nations, to which I shall come later.
The Defence Strategy of Bangladesh

11. We have talked about the conventional security threats to Bangladesh. I shall now talk about the defence strategy for Bangladesh into the next century. It is to be borne in mind that the defence strategy supports our national grand strategy and is guided by the government. Armed forces do not make the defence strategy, although they are important players and provide the government with advice and inputs. I shall put forward my own views on this matter now.

12. **Strategy of Deterrence.** There is a saying, "If you want peace, be prepared for war." This is not the cry of a war monger, rather a hard fact of life. The success of our diplomacy was always backed by our national resolve to pursue our objective. This resolve was always backed by the military strength. There are skeptics amongst us who say, "If we have a peaceful border, why spend money on the military?" Yes, we have a peaceful border and we want it to stay that way. The border will remain peaceful if we have the military means to resist any attempt to change the status quo. We never seek military parity with any of our neighbours; rather our defence strategy is based on "deterrence." Deterrence implies that we have such defensive capabilities that would make an attack on Bangladesh by an aggressor militarily indecisive, economically unprofitable and politically unacceptable. We should be able to inflict such attrition on the attacking forces that would deter them from attacking us in the first place. Of course, should the deterrence fail and we go to war, we should be able to contain the enemy attack and inflict maximum damage on him. Our policy is to pursue peaceful resolution of all problems and have no aggressive design on any other country, but if any outside power decides to commit aggression against Bangladesh or threatens our vital interest, we must have the military means to resist. I believe deterrence will continue to remain the cornerstone of our defence policy for the future.

13. A strategy of deterrence is not a policy option too lofty for us to pursue. Indeed that we already have this capability is proven by the fact that our border has remained peaceful for
nearly three decades and that the nation's vital interests were never compromised. This has been possible because national defence was given due importance right from the inception of Bangladesh.

14. Deterrence as a strategy is all right as far as the external threat is concerned, but what to do with the possible internal threats that might emerge in the future? Against terrorists, drug traffickers and arms smugglers we need different strategy, tactics, and a whole new range of weapons and training. Our two decades of experience in fighting insurgency in the CHT should give us a wealth of knowledge on how to conduct internal security operations. The subject is given due importance at every level of training. There is a need to continuously evaluate the internal threat, and organise, equip and train the forces to match the threat. Suffice it to say here that while prepared to meet any external threat, the armed forces must be able to extend help to civilian law enforcement agencies in the maintenance of internal security and quite often this might be their primary task.

Defence Spending: How to make the Best Use

15. Defence Budget. One question that I often encounter is that, "We are spending too much for defence and that the defence spending could have been better spent in more urgent social development projects." I shall not delve into the defence and development dichotomy, I shall rather show here that we are not spending more than our neighbours; in fact, we are spending much less. There are various ways to measure the relative defence expenditure between states. The chart shows defence expenditures of neighbouring countries, analysed in various ways. In each category, one will note that, Bangladesh is the lowest spender in all accounts. So the argument that we are spending more than others does not hold ground.
It is true that unlike India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, we have a more peaceful external and internal security situation. But as I said before, our preparedness is our best guarantee. Unless we are prepared, when a threat develops it would be too late. One can buy weapons and stores at short notice, but to build an army one needs many years. Sri Lanka learned it the hard way. Years of benign neglect of their military meant that the military was ill prepared to deal with the Tamil insurgency in its infancy. By the time the military forces gathered strength, the Tamils had firmly established themselves. Sri Lanka’s remarkable economic and social gains are now jeopardised due to the civil war. One might argue that if they had spent wisely to build an effective military force in the early years, the Tamils could not have entrenched themselves and the country would have been more prosperous today than it is now. We might recall the old saying, “A stitch in time saves nine.” I would argue that the defence expenditure in Bangladesh should remain at the present level over the next decade. If the country can maintain a sustained growth rate of 5-6% and more, the current level of defence spending is quite affordable.

16. Peoples’ Participation in Defence Policy-making. More important question for us would be how best to spend the defence money. The money for the defence should be wisely spent so that it gives us the best value. How wisely we spend our money will mean how effective our forces are to face the
challenges in the future. This is one area where there is a need for people’s participation. What are our defence priorities? What should be the defence policy and the strategic objectives? How best the forces should be trained and equipped? What should be the shape and size of the armed forces? These and many such questions should be open to public debate. After all it is people’s money and they must decide how best to spend it. Defence issues should be debated both inside and outside the Parliament. These exchanges of ideas will, in the future, coalesce into a national consensus on the defence policy. Good news is that since the restoration of democracy in the country in 1991, this process has been gathering pace. Especially during the last few years, the parliamentary supervision on defence and open debate of various defence-related issues have been increasing.

Future Challenges for the Armed Forces

17. Now I want to deal with specific military issues that need to be addressed in the coming decades.

18. Higher Defence Management. We need to address higher defence management issues in the near future. Over the last two and a half decades three branches of our services grew up, each with their own programmes and priorities. We felt the need for a central coordinating agency at administrative or operational level. The absence of such an agency often resulted in duplication of efforts, non-standardisation of equipment and a general lack of operational coordination between the armed services. Modern warfare is a joint effort where the army, navy and air force train, plan and execute operations jointly. This would entail jointness at every level of command and decision making. Although there has been some progress in joint efforts, a lot more is yet to be done. I suggest a more unified command and control structure for the forces. In Bangladesh we have separate headquarters for the three services: Army, Navy and the Air Force. Above these headquarters we have the Ministry of Defence (MOD), and the Armed Forces Division (AFD) under the Prime Minister’s Office. This is a rather big bureaucracy, in my opinion, for the size of forces that we have. One option
we could look into is a Pentagon or White Hall type of MOD where the Minister for Defence and his staff, the three services Chiefs and their staff would sit. While retaining the individual services HQ, this arrangement would bring the present MOD, AFD and the three services chiefs under one roof. This type of arrangement is quite common these days in the developed world. It reduces the overhead by cutting down administrative staff, quickens the decision-making process and increases the organisational efficiency. Along with the reorganisation of the MOD, we should set up a Joint Forces Headquarters to conduct and coordinate joint forces' operations. In the future, we could have a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in line with the US or UK forces, who would be the senior most military officer of the country and serve as the military adviser to the government.

19. **Increasing Participation in Coalition or Combined Operations.** If the last ten years were a guide into the next decade, one can say that in the future Bangladesh forces are most likely to operate in a coalition or combined force environment. Our participation in the Gulf War in 1991-92 was under a coalition force environment. Since then we have participated in various elaborate missions in peacekeeping and peace making operations. In all these operations we have worked hand in hand with forces from many other countries. It is a matter of pride for us that the armed forces have earned for themselves a place of honour in the preservation and maintenance of world peace. This event alone speaks volumes about the professionalism of our forces. Our forces in blue barrettes have been our finest ambassadors around the globe. They have changed the entrenched image of Bangladesh to the outside world. Over the next decade we are likely to see increasing commitment of UN forces to deal with small-scale regional or internal conflicts. There is also talk of a permanent UN force to deal with the contingencies. In any event, I can foresee an important role for the armed forces of Bangladesh in the international arena. The training for the peacekeeping or disaster management functions is quite different from those of the conventional war or counter-insurgency operations. The military planners will have to take into account the experiences of the UN missions gained so far.
National Security of Bangladesh

and better prepare for the future missions. It is a matter of pride that Bangladesh was the pioneer to include UN peacekeeping operations – its problems and solutions - in the training curriculum of the forces. Many countries are emulating this now.

20. Changing Nature of Warfare. Fast changing technology is changing the war itself. Computers and microchips are bringing in fundamental changes into the warfare. Today one can achieve military objective with much less violence and fewer losses of lives. For example, precision guided weapons, such as the cruise missiles, can now accurately hit and destroy a target that in the past needed scores of aircraft dropping thousands of pounds of bombs and causing unnecessary collateral damage. In fact, traditional weapons of mass destruction, such as the Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) weapons, have lost much of their appeal in the present day. Scientists are also developing non-lethal weapons that could incapacitate the enemy without killing. Our increasing dependence on technology has also increased our vulnerability in case of war. For example, the destruction or disruption of command and control system by the enemy could seriously hamper our ability to conduct operations. We might recall that the Iraqi command and control systems were the first targets that the Coalition air forces went for in the Gulf War. Their destruction completely paralysed the Iraqi forces. We must have a command and control system that survives and functions despite enemy action. The term “information warfare” is increasingly coming in use. This means denying the enemy commander vital information on which he could decide. As we move more and more into the world of computers and real time data, we make ourselves increasingly vulnerable to the technological warfare. Our forces will have to master these technological challenges of time.

21. Force Modernisation. Advancing technology means that our forces will have to be modernised continuously if we want to stay in step. In fact, if we wish to continue to perform our peacekeeping missions, we have to have a minimum level of proficiency. So, force modernisation is not something that
Conventional Security Threats to Bangladesh

is in response to a threat or is directed against anyone in particular. In fact, once a weapon system expires its useful life it has to be replaced with something new or something that has a few years of useful life left. Over the next decade, I hope we shall have a more balanced force structure than we have today. I do not foresee an increase in the gross number of troops, but we need to invest on modernisation of weapon systems, increasing the firepower of the forces, improving the command, control, communication and intelligence network (C3I). In the Army, there is a need to increase the firepower of the forces from infantry weapons to armour and artillery. Increasing mechanisation will improve the mobility of the forces. The importance of the navy will only increase in the future. We shall have to have a credible force in the blue water to stake our claim of the EEZ and ensure unimpeded access and security of seabed resources. Maritime surveillance, both from air and surface, will have to be carried out to protect fishery and energy resources. Air defence of the homeland will continue to remain the prime concern of the Bangladesh Air Force, but providing air cover to the army in the field and the naval forces in the sea will assume greater importance in the future. We need to carry out more joint force exercise to improve our capability to operate in joint force environment. Similarly, we need to exercise with forces of friendly nations in order to be able to operate in combined or coalition force environment.

22. Human Resource Development. That brings us to the issue of human resources development. We have a vast population, but not enough human resources. This apparent contradiction is because of the lack of education and skill that keeps the huge population unsuitable for jobs that demand technical skill. The military jobs demand good physical and mental faculty. Technical nature of the modern warfare demands that the soldiers, sailors and airmen are technically skilled. Even an infantry soldier today may be carrying an infrared night vision goggles, a GPS, a laser rage finder, an NBC protection kit, etc. In Bangladesh, finding the right stuff for the military is going to be harder in the days ahead. We have to compete with the private enterprises in the hunt for qualified and capable candidates to opt for the military as a
career. We have to offer an attractive career for the young people. This is especially true for the officer candidates. We do have some excellent training establishments in the country, but we shall have to continually update their training curricula to stay abreast with the rest of the world.

23. Women in the Military. So far we have kept the military an all male affair, but in the next decade we shall most probably open up the military for females too. Our girls were doing very well in the Bangladesh National Cadet Corps (BNCC), sometimes out-performing the boys in training and exercises. But females were barred from joining the services. This is likely to change in the future. Now that we are not finding sufficient number of boys to qualify as officer candidates, argument for inducting eligible female candidates in the armed forces is increasing. Some preliminary steps in this direction are being taken. In a few years time we should see female officers in some branches of the armed forces and, in not too distant future, we should see females in the ranks too. This is a challenging step forward for our military. Of course, there will be hurdles, obstacles and problems, but those should not daunt us from taking the right step.

24. Regional Cooperation in Defence. There has been much talk on the regional cooperation on various issues. I shall argue that as we step into the next century, we might start thinking about regional defence cooperation too. There are deep-rooted mistrust and divergent strategic interests in the region that would preclude meaningful defence cooperation between the countries of the region, but if our aim is to secure a peaceful neighbourhood then defence cooperation should be on the agenda too. The type of internal threats that are likely to emerge in the future will demand cooperation between the forces of neighbouring countries. Terrorism, drug and arms smuggling know no frontier. If we wish to fight these scourges in the region, armed forces of South Asian nations will have to cooperate on operational level. Exchanging intelligence information on the movement and transit of arms and drugs and launching joint combing operations are few such areas. We need to take up a number of confidence-building measures within the region, some of
which India and Pakistan are already taking. Setting up of Hot Line between the Chiefs, prior notification of exercises or unusual troop movement, occasional meetings and exchange of goodwill visits are some examples. These go a long way in fostering greater understanding between the neighbours.

Conclusion

25. Peace is an essential factor for progress. We are committed to global peace; regional peace is an essential precondition for global peace. However, in our imperfect world that may remain an illusion for quite some time. Meanwhile, we must have the means to safeguard sovereignty of the country by military means, if necessary. The armed forces of Bangladesh are tasked with defending the country from external and internal threats. I have said that while we pursue peaceful resolution of conflicts, the military backs up our effort by providing the muscle. If diplomacy is our first line of defence, the military is our final line. While the role and task of the military will not undergo any fundamental change in the near term, I can foresee the need for major changes in the organisation and force structure, in command and control, in equipment procurement and in manning. The armed forces, like all other institutions of the society, must change with the changing times. We are passing through a very interesting phase of human development. What is in store for us in the future, we wonder? Recently I saw a remark by Peter Drucker, the management Guru, which says it nicely. It says, "The best way to predict future is to create it." I think no elaboration is required.