

ARE CALLS FOR DOWNSIZING OF THE ARMY REALISTIC?

BY

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Introduction

There has been a spurt in suggestions on downsizing of the Indian army, since China took the giant step of announcing last year that it would cut its PLA strength, while increasing the strength of the PLA navy and strategic forces. The calls gained pace post the announcement of the defence budget, picking up steam after the release of a report by the Standing Committee on Defence quoting the army vice chief's comments on the negative impact of the budget on defence preparedness.

Chinese downsizing

Facts behind Chinese troop reductions generally remain shrouded in mystery. As per Global Security on PLA reductions, the PLA began in 1949 with 5.5 million soldiers. It then had an officer to enlisted man ratio of 1:1, since the army consisted of illiterate peasant volunteers. In 2007, the PLA had a 33% officer ratio, which remains far higher than any other nation. The PLA has been downsized regularly since it came into being in the 1950's to offset this skewed balance amongst other factors. It downsized in the fifties, but when the Korean war took place, its strength rose to 6.3 Million. It was reduced by one million in 1985, 500,000 in 1997, 200,000 in 2003 and the latest is a reduction of 300,000 in 2015.

The Chinese have justified their downsizing by stating that it is seeking to create a leaner and meaner army, by reducing its flab, while enhancing the strength and capabilities of its navy and strategic forces. Its force reductions have focussed on few major areas. These are strengthening their navy, air force and strategic forces, reducing officer and NCO ratios with enlisted men, removing administrative organizations, merging units and transferring certain non-PLA units like the railway troops. It has been able to reduce manpower by creating joint commands by reducing logistic echelons, which earlier remained in place to support independent services, but presently one echelon supports all.

The possible Chinese PLA strength as per known details in 2017 post its last reduction was 2 million. It would continue maintaining its large reserve militia force of 1.5 million, not considering an armed police force of a million. The Chinese model, referred to recently by the army chief, General

Bipin Rawat, was to develop its armed forces capability alongside development of its economy. India on the other hand has ignored armed forces capabilities for economic development, except post any crises.

Reducing Indian armed forces flab

While there is logic in cutting down the flab of support echelons in the Indian case, however reduction of the tooth has other connotations. The Indian tooth to tail ratio, implying those supporting the fighting forces is 1:1.5 including civilians paid from the defence budget. The Indian armed forces are a legacy from the British era, where logistic echelons were essential to support fighting forces of the second world war era, especially in the Burmese and Malayan campaigns. For a long time, the army felt that in a war, it would be left alone to maintain, sustain and fight the enemy. However, in the present context, that is far from reality.

With better communication lines, there has been a change in development across the nation. Thus, support in operations would be much more forward than earlier. Further, residents of border areas would prefer staying back and caring for their property rather than withdrawing to rear areas as earlier. This would provide the army with reasonable local support also during operations. Thus, it would imply national effort in times of war, rather than the armed forces catering for everything themselves, as was the case decades ago.

Multiple committees created by the government have recommended reduction of the tail. The Krishna Rao committee of the eighties and the Shekatkar committee recently are two examples. Post the Shekatkar committee recommendations, the government announced its decision to reduce 57,000 military personnel from the tail. However, it has refused to take any decision to reduce the civilian component, fearing labour issues impacting vote banks. Thus, the tail which could be further reduced has been largely left untouched.

Why the tooth should not be reduced

Reduction of the tooth, quoting the Chinese example, needs to be considered with care. The environment within and surrounding the two nations are vastly different. China as a nation has disputes with all its neighbours, however in every case, it is China which claims territory, rather than its adversaries, India being an example. Hence, nations which border

China need to be alert of Chinese intent rather than it being the other way around.

This implies that nations around China need to defend their territory from Chinese misadventures, rather than China defending its own. Indian forces are deployed on the watershed, securing the passes, in their prepared defences which are regularly maintained and upgraded. Chinese forces on the other hand are in depth and have very few defensive positions prepared as India has. Therefore, it would be China which would launch an offensive into Indian territory, rather than being the other way around.

China shifting focus to its navy and strategic forces is to counter the US and its allies, which have begun challenging Chinese growing hegemony in the South China Sea and the oceans around, as its army would play a limited role. Chinese capability development is therefore aimed at countering US might in its areas of interest, rather than its immediate neighbours.

In India's case, standoffs are on the rise as China seeks to push demand for its claim lines. All these occur in areas considered ours, rather than across the border, in Tibet. If troop density is reduced, there are always possibilities of China occupying the passes, adding to own discomfiture. To increase pressure on China by threatening to launch a counter offensive, in case of Chinese misadventures, India has commenced raising a corps for offensive operations.

On the other border is Pakistan, which has remained an adversary since the two nations parted on religious lines. No government has been able to move forward on peace talks, as the Pak army, which controls the nation from the back seat on most occasions and from the driver's seat occasionally, does not desire it. Four wars have been fought yet tensions remain the same. The Shimla agreement failed to resolve Kashmir and since then the relationship has been steadily moving downhill.

The LoC remains active, with regular firing and casualties on both sides. It needs to be manned with strength not only to ensure its sanctity but also to deter infiltration, which Pak regularly resorts to. Though firing has stopped in the Siachen Glacier, yet it cannot be left unoccupied, as Pak could grab parts of it, since it remains un-demarcated. This could have strategic implications for India.

Terror strikes on Indian soil are countered by similar actions across the border. Defences are maintained in strength to deter any adventurism as the border remains unconfirmed. In the present environment troops are

deployed in layers to prevent infiltration. Forces, both defensive and offensive are maintained in a high state of readiness all along the border, as tensions between the two nations remains high. All formations in peace locations also remain on six to twelve hours warning schedule and are regularly exercising their operational role.

Internally, the army is also involved in battling insurgencies in Kashmir and the North East. Most formations employed in counter insurgency have this as their secondary task, their primary being either defensive or offensive along the Northern, Western or Eastern borders. The Rashtriya Rifles (RR) leading the insurgency in Kashmir, remains the only force whose primary role is counter insurgency.

Recently, the Chinese military spokesperson, Colonel Ren Guoqiang, stated, 'I am very confident that military cooperation (between China and Pak) will help facilitate our state to state relationship and also in maintaining regional peace and international stability'. He made this statement post China supplying Pak with a powerful missile tracking system.

This statement is clearly a hint on both alluding to a two-front option, which would be India's major nightmare, if not correctly addressed. Therefore, ensuring defence of both borders with the belief that it may not be possible to move troops deployed along the LoC or LAC from one theatre to the other, during hostilities with one adversary becomes a binding factor in defence planning.

Nuclear Factor

There is a belief that since all three nations possess nuclear weapons, chances of an all-out conflict remain low. Both India and China have a 'no first use' nuclear doctrine. A standoff may escalate as Doklam did threaten to, however the operations would most likely be under a nuclear shadow but would remain conventional.

Pak, fearing India's declared 'cold start' doctrine, has deployed its tactical nuclear missiles forward at Gujranwala and Pano Aqil. It has continuously threatened India with a pro-active nuclear strike, in case India launches any offensive. India would, in case it takes a decision to launch, aim to keep it below the nuclear threshold, by restricting its terminal objectives.

Thus, possession of nuclear weapons alone may not be a deterrence against war. Only strong conventional capabilities may be a deterrent, which remains India's shortcoming.

Conclusion

India remains the only country in the world which has hostile nuclear armed adversaries on both its borders, who continue to claim large parts of its territory while supporting secessionist and militant groups within. Both the nations remain wary of India's growing economic prowess and rising international stature. Thus, the Indian army remains amongst the most committed ones of its kind in the world.

In this context, seeking to reduce manpower, especially of its teeth, is pushing its already over committed force deeper into operations, with almost no breaks. Such action is detrimental in maintaining operational effectiveness of the fighting force. Further Indian central police forces are neither trained nor equipped to function independently in counter insurgency tasks.

It should also be understood by those desiring that the nation adopt the Chinese model, that despite all constraints, the army continues to ensure security of the nation and its institutions, enabling rapid economic development. Its conventional force capacities and capabilities must therefore continue being enhanced as threat levels and capabilities of our adversaries continue to rise. Reducing the tail may be logical but tampering with its teeth would be detrimental.

Attempting to ape the Chinese would be catastrophic for national security. Thus arm-chair strategists, who are presently drunk by the power of their pen, need to reassess their ideas with realism, rather than jump and copy nations who face no threat, rather threaten others.

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