

DPC COMMENCES ITS ACT
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The first meeting of the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) headed by the NSA, Ajit Doval, was held early this month. It being the first meeting, a statement mentioned, 'No major decision was taken. The meeting, which lasted for around two hours, discussed the key challenges ahead and how to address them'. Another statement mentioned, 'The members deliberated on the geo-strategic landscape and agreed to chart a time bound action plan in keeping with its broad mandate'.

An article by Nitin Gokhale, post the meeting, states that the DPC decided to concentrate on a few issues in the short and mid-term. These include formulating a National Security Strategy (NSS), building military infrastructure along India's land and maritime borders and creating indigenous capability to manufacture ammunition.

An NSS draft exists, whether it would accept it or recommence its own study on the same, remains to be seen. Without infrastructure, the armed forces were hampered in countering threats, whether it involved Andamans and Nicobar or the Chinese front. Monitoring it and clearing multiple road blocks which delay its development requires a top down push, which would now be given.

Ammunition is a major criticality, holding of which was low enough for the government to note with alarm. Dependence was either on the Ordnance Factories (OFB) or import. Creating infrastructure within the country would result in multiple benefits. It would reduce dependence as also create employment and enhance investment, while saving critical foreign exchange.

The mandate of the DPC includes formulating a defence and national security policy, creation of sub-committees to assess defence diplomacy, defence manufacturing and eco systems and defence capability development. The major reason for India not issuing any official national security document in the last 70 years has been lack of political consensus and governments not establishing coordinated and synergized departments to formulate policies on national security.

Thus, despite its multiple shortcomings, it is the first time that a committee comprising key stake holders has been created. The message it

clearly conveys is that a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) is ruled out for the moment, however, its present composition sends a positive signal, provided it continues to function over the years and completes its mandate in a desired timeframe.

Developing defence capabilities is a time-consuming process and is ideal when the three services are integrated. However, with the establishment of the DPC, the NSA would function as the de-facto CDS, seeking to formulate a common procurement plan based on emerging threat perceptions. As Late Mr K Subrahmanyam had stated in the Kargil Committee report, 'Long range planning must become an article of faith with us, if crises management and adhocism is to be avoided and the nation is to be provided with a sound and desired defence capability'.

Developing structures to meet future challenges also impacts national economy. As is known, India has been the largest importer of military hardware in recent years, solely because of its reliance on the DRDO, which apart from rocket technology and a few limited fields, has failed or produced equipment below acceptable standards. International procurements are costly on the exchequer. Orders placed by the present government in the international arms market would only be fully inducted and integrated into the armed forces after possibly a decade. Such lead time is normal. Further, no nation can ever be a major power by imports alone.

The nations from whom India imports would always place riders while providing hardware. Despite any international grouping, all nations consider their own national interests prior to those they are closely associated with. The US applying CAATSA, impacting Indian plans to procure the S-400 missile system and other hardware from Russia as also placing sanctions on Iran, which may impact Indian interests, are a case in point. Therefore, reliance must be on developing an in-house industrial base. The sympathy accorded to DRDO and OFB must end and these made to compete with private and international concerns, planning to establish factories in India, under Indian terms and conditions.

The aim of the DPC needs to be clear. It must look at the international security environment at least 15 to 20 years ahead and the challenges which India is likely to face. These challenges would be multiple, implying

economic, domestic and military. These need to be assessed considering what would be Indian interests at that phase. It is probable that by then India would have secured its own frontiers and expanded its bases to counter challenges away from its shores and been a power beyond the immediate region.

While assessing these challenges the likely capabilities and strength of our major adversaries need to be factored in. Realistically, China would remain a threat, despite all bonhomie between the leaders, not only militarily, but also in the diplomatic and economic environment. Pak, if assessed, would either be subjugated by China or a nation struggling to survive economically and engulfed with internal crises. Instability in the neighbourhood would always remain a concern. India's internal threats would need to also be factored in.

Some emerging threats could be handled diplomatically or politically, some would need a strong military deterrence. It should remain noted that the power of diplomacy only exists if backed by resolute military power. As Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, had stated in his address in Delhi, 'The strong survive. You make peace with the strong. You make alliances with the strong. You're able to maintain peace by being strong.'

Based on these emerging challenges and its NSS, would emerge the strategic planning guidance for desired capabilities which the armed forces would need and the manner of their procurement. This would result in the creation of a joint capability plan for the short, mid and long term. It would factor in the economic health of the nation and a realistic share of the budget. An unrealistic planning, without economic backing is fruitless and would be a failure.

Some equipment may continue to be purchased from the international market, whereas the majority would need to be developed internally. Thus, defence planning, procurement and development of an in-house industrial base is essential. Unless considered now, they would be unavailable in the desired period.

If the DPC is seeking to complete its task in a realistic timeframe, then it needs to incorporate think tanks, educational institutions and experts into the multiple sub committees that it proposes to create. Service HQs within themselves may be insufficient.

The DPC has undertaken an immense mandate for itself, which if it succeeds would fulfil a major void in Indian security planning. Once requisite policies are created and accepted, future governments would only need to revisit them and make minor amendments with passage of time. The

ultimate question, whose answer would flow with time, is whether this is another committee set up to delay reorganizing higher defence management or is it the answer to futuristic Indian defence planning?

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