

Defense News Conclave

Stories of U.S. - India Defense Partnership

WORKSHOP REPORT

DEFENSE MODERNISATION IN INDIA: POLICIES, COMMANDS AND CAPABILITIES

29 JULY 2022, 11:00 hours – 13:00 hours (IST)

SUMMARY

At the third workshop under the Defense News Conclave Project, panellists discussed defense reforms in India, from military command and organisational structures to procurement and acquisition policies. These, along with the strategic decision-making processes, are among the most complex and least understood areas in this sector. The workshop took stock of the structural reform path India has embarked upon in the defense sector, its success, and the way forward. Panellists also discussed the need to articulate a National Security Strategy (NSS) and a National Defense Policy for India, along with assessing recent military reforms in India, including the creation of the office of the Chief of Defense Staff (CDS), the prospects of establishing joint theatre commands, and service reforms such as *Agneepath*. In addition, the panel discussed reforming defense budgeting, procurement, manufacturing and R&D-related policies for increased defense preparedness and modernising the Indian military for 21st-century warfare.

PANELLISTS

- Maroof Raza, (*Media Commentator, National Security Issues*)
[Moderator]
- Amit Cowshish, (*Partner, Dua Associates and former Financial Advisor (Acquisition), Ministry of Defence*)
- Manvendra Singh, (*Former Member of Parliament and Chairman, Soldier Welfare Advisory Committee, Rajasthan*)
- Capt. Anubha Rathaur, (*Defence Expert and Academician*)
- Cmde. Anil Jai Singh, (*Maritime and Defence Analyst and Former Vice President, Indian Maritime Foundation*)

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The [Defense News Conclave](#) project is being implemented by CUTS International. Supported by the U.S. Department of State (U.S. Consulate Kolkata), this project aims to create awareness about the importance of U.S.-India defense relations, particularly in contemporary developments in the Indo-Pacific region. The target audience is media professionals, including journalists from all over India. The third workshop focused on reforms across the defense sector in India.

INTRODUCTION

The Master of Ceremony welcomed the Panellists, Moderator, and Participants and briefly introduced the Defense News Conclave Project to the audience. The moderator, Maroof Raza, set the tone for the session by laying out the importance of defense modernisation and restructuring, as well as the hindrances in the reforms.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Amit Cowshish commented on defence budgeting and planning by quoting Mark Twain, “*The lack of money is the root of all evil*”. He extended the remarks to say there is a mismatch between the plans and finances to execute the reforms. Observing the need for an emphasis on output-oriented defence budgeting, he noted that there had been multiple reform efforts but they had never materialised into reality. Fruitless prescriptions were emphasised, like increasing the defence budget to 3% of GDP, creating a non-lapsable pool of funds and separating the defence budget from the central budget. In his opinion, these were fruitless because the entire budget came from a single source - the Consolidated Fund of India. The focus should instead be on financially viable defence planning.

Cowshish also spoke about the Defence Ministry’s moves for manpower and capital reductions, pointing out that a concrete roadmap towards these was never formulated. Some suggestions like outsourcing were pitched, but a cost-benefit analysis was never considered. As far as procurement is concerned, when a new deal is signed, payments are scattered over a period of time to accommodate new acquisitions, rather than signing all the required equipment contracts. This is because there is no system for managing committed liability.

He also observed that revenue expenditure needs to be separated from capital expenditure to better understand the acquisition procedure. From 2001 onwards, there was an increase in the delegation of revenue items acquired by the Services. He highlighted various related points including the procedural complexity of revenue procurement and the Integrated Financial Advice (IFA) system. There are also instances of underutilisation of funds.

On capital expenditure, Cowshish noted the joint efforts of the Ministry and Services for the creation of a capital acquisition structure post-Kargil War. He stressed that the acquisition process remains Services-driven, starting from the decision of buying equipment, quality requirements, field trials, and staff evaluations. He agreed in principle to the need for separating Service Headquarters from the

Defence Ministry, but highlighted that there had been never been serious discussions on the modalities of the same. He recognised the role of such seminars and discussions in deliberating on these issues.

Manvendra Singh said that the perceptions of defence modernisation of the Defence Ministry and the Service Headquarters are often opposed to each other. While the Indian armed forces have a Joint Doctrine promulgated by HQ, Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) in 2017, it is not an officially declared statement of Indian defence policy. There is a need for an overarching NSS, of which armed forces' doctrines should form a part. Further, he emphasised that an NSS is not the sole responsibility of the Defence Ministry, and it requires a combined effort by various line Ministries like Statistics, Department of Atomic Energy, Shipping and many more, to come out with a coherent Strategy document.

On joint and theatre commands, he observed that jointmanship couldn't come from the top down. Instead, it needed to follow a pyramidal bottom-up model. This will only come up with integration at the combat level, which required the Services to plan and operate together. He suggested having a Joint Logistics Command streamlining command and logistics as a preliminary step, rather than immediately aiming for more ambitious joint command models. Regarding defence budgets, Singh laid emphasis on the need to base allocations on demand, rather than a pre-decided budgetary cap.

Singh also pointed to the lack of frank conversations between the armed forces, the bureaucracy and the legislature. He also clearly stated he does not favour end-users of military equipment deciding the acquisition process completely. Importantly, he recognised that separation between civil and military structures is a requirement of the Indian political system.

In terms of manpower, Singh emphasised the need for a clearly defined role for the Armed Forces in terms of need-based deployment. The focus now needed to be on the crisis in India's submarine fleet and preparing for a third aircraft carrier. The paramilitary forces and armed forces need to be treated separately, as they are governed by entirely different service regulations. He also flagged the frequent resort to armed forces in matters of internal security as a cause of concern.

Capt. Anubha Rathaur talked about her experience during the Kargil War, where she was posted in a forward field team, including the procurement and inventory related challenges during those times. She recounted that the mindset and environment surrounding women officers were challenging, and they were often treated separately as "women officers" instead of simply "officers". There was a shortage of equipment (armour, ammunition, apparel, and even essential items like mosquito nets), mainly due to sanctions imposed after India's nuclear tests and the limited production of indigenous military equipment. Regarding the way forward to facilitate a greater role for women officers in forward posts, she suggested tackling logistical challenges as a priority area.

Cmde. Anil Jai Singh discussed several changes made in the Indian Navy recently, such as Underway Replenishment Ships embarking women officers and the decision to expand the role of women sailors. He noted the significant increase in the Indian Navy's engagement with the U.S. Navy, from the Malabar exercise to the signing of logistical agreements and the reconfiguring of the U.S.-Indo-Pacific command.

He spoke at length about the importance of NSS as an imperative for warfare in the 21st century. In the absence of such strategic guidance, there is no ground on which India is undertaking structural reforms in the military. He also cautioned India against aping other countries' security strategies and emphasised the need to craft its own model, considering all the multi-dimensional kinetic and non-kinetic challenges. Most countries like the U.S., Russia and China, who have adapted to Theatre Commands, have aimed for future scenarios and the ability to deploy considerable military power beyond their borders. Hence, formulating Theatre Commands has to be in sync with an NSS. Military preparedness and civilian structures associated with it, like the Defence Ministry, need to evolve alongside the creation of such commands. Similarly, operational decision-making in a Joint Theatre Command structure is another factor that requires a lot of discussion.

Jai Singh observed the challenges arising after procuring defence equipment, particularly following standard competitive bidding models. He highlighted the example of equipment purchased from different Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs), which led to operational, maintenance and training challenges. He also laid out the importance of India making early decisions on its collaborations for nuclear-powered attack submarines to meet its goal of being a pre-eminent blue water power in the Indian Ocean. This would facilitate India's recognition as a preferred security partner in the Indo-Pacific region by major powers like the U.S.

He also emphasised the potential of Quad with three resident powers of the Pacific and the only resident power of the Indian Ocean - India. Jai Singh stated that the security of the Indian Ocean is the primary concern of India, and for this, a Maritime Theatre Command is the need of the hour. He noted that the PLA Navy (PLAN) is expanding rapidly, with almost 20 to 25 blue water platforms being commissioned annually and aircraft carriers commissioned and launched every three years. Accordingly, the Indian Navy has to be realistic about its capability and capacity and work closely with all its partners to ensure the security of the Indian Ocean. He suggested dealing with threats in the Indian Ocean by restricting them to the east of the Malacca Sea, thereby preventing them from reaching the Indian ocean.

Jai Singh recognised India joining the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) as an associate member as a positive step. India would not be a CMF member, but the Indian Navy will aid, support and engage with its activities in the region. This suits India, as a preferred security partner in the Indian Ocean region. Overall, he noted the need for India to develop its power to protect its interests. This would be crucial as the great power rivalry between the U.S. and China plays out in the Indian ocean.

Maroof Raza noted that there are a lot of inter-related areas in defense, and operating in watertight compartments was not sustainable. Further, he lamented that each Service was focused more on guarding their own turfs, rather than working synergistically under a combined doctrine. India's bureaucratic ambiguity will also work against our levels of defense preparedness in the long run.

Regarding Indian defense purchases, he noted procurement amidst crisis situations as a major challenge – India could not be parallelly fending off adversaries and sourcing weapons. He also observed that only 20 to 30% of the Forces' equipment is new, while 65% is obsolete. This is a universal issue, and even the U.S. army faces such challenges.

As far as women officers are concerned, Raza pointed out that although there had been a lot of changes over the years, the issue was in many ways a reflection of our society. Unlike the U.S., where many women officers are deployed and easily integrated with the predominantly male troops, seamlessly merging women officers in India with the armed forces remains challenging.

Raza went on to state that while the Quad has an explicitly maritime angle aimed at containing China, it refuses to state this explicitly in its joint statements. He noted the recent attention on the civil-military relations in India and the resurrection of some recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee and the Naresh Chandra committee on strategic restructuring.

He also observed that the controversies relating to military turf issues and military commanders being outside the loop of decision-making were nothing new, occurring since the days when Krishna Menon was at the helm of the Defence Ministry, and in the context of the standoff between Nehru and General Thimayya.

Raza suggested a restructuring of both the Defence Ministry and the military, such as reducing the current 17 Commands to 4-5, a coherent national security decision-making structure headed by the National Security Advisor, and a clear demarcation of roles of the military and paramilitary forces.

In his comments on the defence acquisition process, he opined that in the final stages of the purchase, the Services are often kept out of the financial matters. Similarly, in negotiations with foreign vendors and OEMs, he noted that the decisions are often political, and the Services are kept out of the loop. The fear of making financially wrong decisions by the bureaucracy also leads to endless delays. Non-consultative political decisions can also be seen in the case of policies like *Agneepath*. In his remarks, Raza also pointed to the need to create a dedicated group of experts specialising in defence acquisition.

A lively Q&A session followed the panel discussion. Participants posed questions on diverse topics such as the hurdles in the transfer of technology, strategic refocus in Indo-Pacific, *Atmanirbharta* in defense initiatives, development of nuclear submarines, and acquisition procedures, among others.