

# Celebrating the Journey of the Indian Armed Forces and the Way Forward

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The journey of the Indian Armed Forces over the last 100 years has in many ways mirrored the momentous history of the birth, struggles and victories of India. It straddles a colonial period in which the armed forces of India owed allegiance to a foreign sovereign and could readily be used to fight an alien power's wars and promote its strategic objectives. This did not however erode the heroism and professionalism that the Indian armed forces came to be known for over two centuries. From the Afghan Wars to the Battle of Saragarhi, where a small band of Sikh soldiers wreaked havoc during a siege mounted by a numerically superior adversary, to the two great wars, and in numerous British campaigns across Asia and Africa, the Indian sepoy set the highest standards in valour. Even the apostle of peace and non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, had served as a sergeant major of a medical ambulance corps that he had helped raise during the Second Boer War in 1899–1902 and Zulu War in 1906.

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However, there was also a dark side to these tales of bravery when the British used Gorkha and Baluchi troops against innocent civilians during the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919.

### PHASE I

In a sense, the first phase of the armed forces' journey commenced immediately after independence during the war in Kashmir in 1947–48 and terminated with the debacle of the 1962 India–China War. This period saw relatively young and inexperienced Indian officers being catapulted overnight into mid-level and senior positions in the armed forces. The doctrines, training and experience that guided them so well during World War II were ill-suited towards either the advent of communism and 'people's war' advocated by China, or to Jawaharlal Nehru's worldview, which was predicated on India's moral and not military power. Participation in the Korean War by offering medical assistance and sending the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance Platoon, a mobile army surgical hospital with doctors and dentists, did little to address the real problems faced by a strong colonial military force that was now without the same energy and objectives. The political leadership wedded to *ahimsa*, that had achieved independence through the mantra of non-violence, could not grasp the gravity of the security challenges evolving in India's periphery.

A decade of budgetary cuts that followed further compounded the problem, leaving the Indian army without adequate weapons or manpower when things came to a head with China in the late 1950s. In fact, the Indian army was kept away from India's borders, whether in Ladakh or in North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), till the government's hand was forced by the Chinese attack and occupation of an Assam Rifles post at Longju in August 1959 and an equally bloody ambush of an Indian police party at Konka La, eastern Ladakh, in October of the same year.

### Lessons Learnt

One of the greatest lessons of the 1962 conflict perhaps was the realisation that in regard to territory the old adage held true—that possession was nine-tenths of the law! China's entry first into Tibet in 1950, and later its creeping presence in Aksai Chin over the following decade also taught the Indian armed forces, and the new political masters, to think in terms of precise borders, not just frontiers. The text and context of the treaty between India and the Tibet Region of China in 1954 are fine examples

of how passes on the border are interpreted differently by a covetous China, leading to contention.

Yet another lesson was that an army must be well-equipped with the latest weaponry to protect India's territorial integrity and that summer uniforms, canvas shoes and outdated .303 Lee Enfield rifles were no match against the hordes of arms possessed by the Chinese with relatively modern automatic weapons. Perhaps even greater was the lesson that the Order of Battle (ORBAT) and chain of command in any army are sacrosanct. Even though war is too important a matter to be left to the Generals, this did not justify the frequent changes in command in NEFA, whether at the Brigade, Division or Corps levels even as the crisis was unfolding. Even more egregious a lesson was the realisation of the damage that could be caused to the direction and morale of an army when the military chain of command is trifled with, as was the case in 1962 when Lt Gen B.M. Kaul, the hastily appointed IV Corps Commander in the North-East, had the ear of the political leadership, with the then Chief of Army Staff (COAS) being sidelined. Or that a Defence Minister (V.K. Krishna Menon was the Minister of Defence then) could dull the martial instincts of a splendid army by repeatedly underplaying the China threat despite professional assessments to the contrary.

It was also decided that the Indian Air Force would not be deployed during the war in any offensive role, thereby negating the advantage that could have been created. Bravery by individuals and some units notwithstanding, the shock of the ill-planned retreat and humiliating defeat in 1962 led to a fundamental change in the structure, training, equipping and disposition of the armed forces, for the better.

## PHASE II

With this commenced the second phase of the journey of the armed forces which lasted until 1988. The period after the 1962 War not only saw the size of the army increase from about 5,50,000 to approximately 8,25,000 troops, but, over time, it also witnessed structural, training and doctrinal shifts. Even as these preparations were underway, Pakistan attempted to seize the opportunity created by the 1962 defeat, the political void after the death of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964 and prevailing conditions in Jammu and Kashmir. After a failed attempt to push in raiders, President Ayub Khan unleashed a war with the mistaken notion that the opportunity was ripe to force a defeat upon India. However,

despite structural issues and limitations of equipment that still posed a challenge, India responded resolutely under the leadership of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Defence Minister Y.B. Chavan to blunt the aggression.

The war ended in a stalemate, with Pakistan's initial advantage having been neutralised by the resurgent armed forces of India, backed by an equally determined public sentiment. Peace with Pakistan, however, was short-lived. In 1971, the Pakistani state unleashed one of the worst genocides upon its own Bengali population in East Pakistan. The Pakistani army was used as an instrument of repression of the most horrendous nature. This led to 10 million refugees entering India. India endeavoured to seek a peaceful solution to the humanitarian crisis that arose. However, having failed, and in the face of Pakistan's declaration of war on 3 December 1971, India's armed forces undertook a lightning campaign which led to Pakistan's defeat and ushered in the finest hour in India's post-independence military history.

The layered military strategy adopted by India in the 1971 War saw a nuanced approach that dealt with each theatre and sector according to its ground reality. While the western front along Pakistan witnessed 'offensive defence' being employed, due care was also taken to ensure that the threat from China remained contained in the north. On the eastern front, an offensive strategy was adopted along with the tenets of rapid manoeuvre warfare to bypass major enemy concentration centres to create an opening that brought Dacca within reach in less than two weeks of the war. The campaign was backed by the East Pakistan population and supported by the Mukti Bahini. Innovation on the part of the armed forces, complete cohesion between different constituents of the government, including the three services, and use of psychological warfare against the adversary ensured the collapse of Pakistan's military. The surrender of 90,000 Pakistani soldiers, a record of its kind since World War II, was accompanied by the birth of Bangladesh. The Prisoners of War (POWs) were treated well and despatched in due course back to Pakistan with dignity, given the high standards maintained in such matters by the armed forces of India.

Even though India's armed forces had delivered an unqualified victory, the path that followed was not free of challenges. The world was rapidly changing. The Sino-US rapprochement in 1972, the third Arab-Israel War in 1973 and the oil crisis, the end of a long-drawn war in Vietnam in 1975, the failed Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979,

the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the same year and the Iran–Iraq War in 1980 together created an environment that demanded adjustments in India’s military preparedness. Pakistan and China had come even closer and Pakistan had the backing of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the West for services rendered against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The nature of the threat from Pakistan was changing. The western adversary had new supply lines of finance and armaments. The Pakistani army was more Islamist than before, and was nurturing *jihadis* that could be used against India as well.

The realities of the evolving military preparations on the Pakistani side, which included the creation of extensive battlefield obstacle systems, demanded a shift on the Indian side to mobile fast-paced warfare on land with the ability to undertake deep strikes in the open terrain of the deserts. This, and the need to cut the teeth-to-tail ratio, led to emphasis on mechanisation of the Indian army and upgradation of the other two services as well. The 1980s saw this process underway, with the armed forces gaining substantially in capability during that period.

The modernisation of the armed forces was also accompanied by a willingness to venture beyond India’s borders in support for calls from neighbours for assistance. While the peacekeeping mission in Sri Lanka spearheaded by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) led to questionable strategic gains despite heavy losses to men and material, Operation Cactus launched in the Maldives against an attempted coup produced appreciable results in 1988.

However, both forays by India did bring home important lessons not only for the armed forces but also for policy-makers. These related to the need to hone capabilities, including expeditionary, according to emerging threats and challenges, as also to fill the critical voids that became evident during both these operations. These included gaps in coordination, equipment deficiencies, weaknesses in joint structures and readiness to operate beyond the Indian shores.

### PHASE III

A new phase in the journey of the Indian armed forces commenced in the mid-1980s. The Chinese challenge in Sumdorong Chu was met by transporting an entire brigade by helicopters. This was also the time when the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was acquiring new weapons systems, including the US-made Sikorsky helicopters to be used in mountainous areas. For the Indian armed forces, the scope and scale of challenges

had multiplied further. While India had managed to keep in check sub-conventional threats such as insurgencies in the North-east and terrorism in Punjab, the threats to the nation were magnified by the adversities encountered in the deployment of Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka and the spike in Pak-sponsored cross-border terrorism in Kashmir.

The involvement of Pakistan became more pronounced in Kashmir, as terrorism emerged as its primary instrument in the low-intensity hybrid war against India. The armed forces were stretched to the extreme and the simultaneity of the threats demanded local understanding of each challenge and calibration of the efforts accordingly. Winning hearts and minds became as important as taking a bead on terrorists through a rifle-sight. A people-centric approach also meant that the armed forces would take higher casualties. This, the armed forces did without demur, despite a large number of soldiers laying down their lives to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India. For an entirely voluntary military, the commitment and dedication towards duty of the Indian armed forces is truly exemplary.

Pakistan's frustration at not being able to achieve a major breakthrough in Kashmir, eventually led to its misadventure at Kargil in 1999. What followed was one of the most laudable and awe-inspiring effort on part of the armed forces. They had one hand tied behind their backs as they successfully fought inch by inch with the support of the Indian Air Force, to beat back the incursions along the Line of Control (LoC) without crossing it. The Kargil experience raised questions, akin to those raised in the 1950s in Aksai Chin in the run-up to the 1962 conflict, about the effectiveness of intelligence gathering, and the need for regular patrolling of India's border regions. The Kargil episode also raised questions about structures and institutions, to develop more effective and timely responses to future challenges based on the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee and Group of Ministers (GoM).

Some early measures undertaken thereafter included the appointment of a full-time National Security Advisor, creation of Multi-Agency Centre, the establishment of a tri-services command in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO). The 2008 dastardly terror attacks in Mumbai occasioned the revamping of the National Security Guard (NSG) and beefing up of maritime security through the Indian Coast Guard and the Indian Navy acting in tandem with state police. A second front had opened up vis-à-vis Pakistan's malevolence, all along India's coastline.

#### PHASE IV

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi undertook a major course correction in 2014. A proactive approach was adopted to enhance the budget for all three wings of the armed forces. The Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard in particular, received generous funding to meet emerging maritime threats, both traditional and non-traditional. Apart from preventing sea-mounted terrorist attacks, thwarting piracy and smuggling of drugs and arms, India's maritime security must now factor in the growing presence of the Chinese PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean.

A policy of zero tolerance was adopted in regard to terrorism from across the border. This resulted in a cross-LoC strike against terrorist camps in 2016 after an attack at an army camp at Uri. In 2019, after a deadly suicide bombing against CRPF troopers at Pulwama, offensive airpower was employed for the first time against terrorist targets in Balakot, deep inside the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. These actions changed the strategy adopted by the armed forces against terrorism sponsored by Pakistan. For once, caution was replaced by a proactive approach and it was Pakistan that was forced to assume a reactive posture against India's actions. It also demonstrated India's ability to undertake conventional military action against Pakistan under a nuclear overhang.

In recent years, the armed forces have also undertaken a tough stance against border violations by China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Both in 2017 and in 2020, Chinese attempts at altering *status quo* were not only challenged, but also blunted through immediate action by India. These actions displayed India's resolute and firm stance in the face of provocations. It also proved that the armed forces deliver better when the political leadership is resolute and gives military leaders the resources and independence to undertake initiatives as well as counter-measures based on their professional military assessment. In the aftermath of the Chinese aggression in Galwan in eastern Ladakh in June 2020, Prime Minister Modi's government left no stone unturned to equip the armed forces with modern weapons, equipment and logistics needed to mirror the Chinese deployments.

Today, the armed forces are also leading the way in support of *Aatmanirbhar Bharat*—a call for self-reliance given by Prime Minister Modi. A wide-ranging set of measures have been undertaken to give a fillip to 'Make in India' through a tandem between the public and private sector. Entrepreneurs representing the small and medium sector

have been provided support and opportunities to contribute to this endeavour. They have also been granted access to testing facilities of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) to support their attempts at manufacturing in India as part of the 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' initiative.

The focus on indigenisation is not however aimed at creating absolute autarky in defence manufacturing. Current policies leave enough space for foreign Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) to participate in joint ventures and transfer of technology (ToT).

The armed forces have also witnessed a number of institutional changes. Gender equality is a laudable achievement. Unlike in the past when women were restricted to representation in a few branches of the armed forces such as the Medical and Education Corps, nowadays most wings of the armed forces have seen the entry of women. In addition to permanent commissions, women are also flying combat aircraft, being deployed in naval vessels and are now permitted to train alongside their male counterparts at the prestigious National Defence Academy.

On 15 August 2019, the Prime Minister announced the path-breaking decision of the government to create the post of Chief of Defence Staff and the Department of Military Affairs. This met a long-standing demand in strategic circles. These institutional changes have ushered in earnest major defence reforms at the highest echelons. The process is being further strengthened with reforms aimed at integration at the level of theatres as well as jointness down the chain of command. Steps are already underway to bring about much-needed integration within the training and logistics establishments as well.

Simultaneously, there is an unprecedented emphasis on making the armed forces technology-centric, taking into account the advent of artificial intelligence, Internet of Things and modern advances in stand-off weapons and surveillance techniques. This is aimed at enhancing the capability of the armed forces to fight modern-day conflicts across the entire spectrum.

#### CONCLUSION

The last 70 years have been both a challenge and an opportunity for the armed forces. Many tough challenges have been met with great resilience by India's armed forces. They have used several opportunities to adapt and improve along every yardstick in military performance. An outstanding and consistent feature of the Indian armed forces remains



their secular tradition as well as apolitical professionalism under civilian governments.

Going by their record, there is little doubt that the armed forces will continue to remain steadfast in dealing robustly against external threats and simultaneously supporting the government's actions to improve internal security. This will increasingly be done through improved structures and a technologically driven organisation, supported by the clear vision of resolute political leadership.