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## India: the next superpower?: the military dimensions of India's rise

### Report

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# ➤ The Military Dimensions of India's Rise

Iskander Rehman

**P**ower is a notoriously elusive concept. The question of how one can define, list, and identify the different facets of national power is one that has long preoccupied social scientists. In our rapidly changing world, which is witnessing a major diffusion in wealth from west to east, the question of power is accompanied by an added sense of urgency, as we seek to understand which states will wield true power in the emerging international system. The first, and most immediately identifiable form of power is a nation's military strength. The numbers and characteristics of infantry battalions, fleets of vessels and columns of tanks seem to provide clear, straightforward, and easily quantifiable indicators of a country's growing clout. This apparent simplicity, however, is highly deceptive. The study of military power cannot solely be based on an assessment of resources. Rather, the question is how a nation decides to convert those same resources into favourable outcomes, or to put it more bluntly, how it translates military hardware into military effectiveness, and how that same military effectiveness is harnessed as a means of grand strategy. To study military power, we therefore need to examine the interwoven human, institutional and doctrinal aspects which undergird the manner in which military resources are both procured and used.

Under such conditions, can India be characterised as a great military power? In terms of pure resources and sheer manpower, without a doubt. But the uneven nature of Delhi's military modernisation, an apparent dearth of grand strategy, and a perennially dysfunctional state of bureaucratic paralysis cast serious doubts over the prospects of India's rise as a global military power any time soon. Absent a genuine desire to engage in widespread organisational reform, or to profoundly recast India's troubled civil-military relationship, India will remain a regional, rather than a global military power.

## **GLUT OF RESOURCES, LACK OF FOCUS?**

In December 2011 Foreign Policy magazine gave pride of place to 'India's Military Buildup', quoting a recent Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) report which states that India is now the largest weapons importer in the world, along with studies that indicate that India may spend up to \$80 billion on military modernisation by 2015. A number of events in recent years, including the 2009 launch of India's first indigenously designed nuclear submarine, and a range of lucrative arms deals (such as the close to \$20 billion deal to purchase 126 multi-role fighter aircraft), have captivated the attention of foreign observers, and led some to conclude that India is on the verge of attaining military superpower status.

Indeed, India, if only in terms of sheer quantitative resources, is a great military power. With over 1.3 million men and women in uniform, and an additional one million in reserve, the Indian Armed Forces constitute the third-largest volunteer war-fighting force in the world. The Indian Air Force has more than 665 combat capable aircraft in its inventory, and is actively engaged in the acquisition of several fourth- and fifth-generation fighters. India's Navy, often touted as a sign of India's growing military

influence overseas, has over 40 ships and submarines on order, including aircraft carriers, large amphibious assault vessels, and nuclear submarines. India's military modernisation has been fuelled by annual GDP growth rates oscillating in-between 7 and 9 percent over the past decade.

This economic growth has meant that even though its share of overall GDP has stagnated, flickering in-between 2 and 3 percent, India's defence budget has undergone a threefold increase in real terms, from \$11.8 billion in 2001 to \$36.3 billion for the current fiscal year. India's capital expenditure, that is, the portion of funds devoted to the direct acquisition of new weapon systems, is projected to soar from \$13.1 billion in 2010-2011 to close to \$20 billion in 2015. Unlike during the Cold War, when India's sluggish growth compelled it to rely on cheaper Soviet equipment in order to maintain its military deterrent, New Delhi now has access to a glut of resources. The question is whether India has the institutional and political capacity to mobilise those same resources effectively, and to modernise strategically, in response to clearly identified challenges, rather than simply pursuing a smorgasbord approach to modernisation, bereft of any clear focus.

For the time being, India's military modernisation appears somewhat uneven. Major acquisitions seem all too often to be driven by the quest for prestige, the desire for technology transfer or by deep-seated institutional preferences. The Indian Army is modernising at a rapid pace in certain niche areas, such as missile and mechanised warfare, but the average jawan remains poorly equipped, armed with antiquated assault rifles which frequently fail to operate effectively in the harsh mountainous conditions that characterise India's disputed borders. The Army also confronts significant shortfalls in its officer cadre, which is critically understaffed. The growing difficulty in attracting India's best and brightest into the military is a problem spread across all services, with the Indian Navy recently announcing a major recruitment drive.

At an operational level, the Navy's strongly carrier-centric focus has led it to systematically neglect anti-submarine warfare and sea denial in favour of sea control and soft power projection.

This has led to certain systemic weaknesses within India's blue-water fleet, which with less than 50 percent of its small 14 boat submarine flotilla deemed operational, and no towed array sonars currently stationed on board its surface vessels, is disturbingly vulnerable to submarine attacks. Similarly, the Indian Air Force, which has since independence interiorised the British Royal Air Force's cult of the fighter pilot, tends to inordinately favour flight capabilities and air dominance over ground support and weapons packages. This explains, in part, the recent decision by the IAF to opt for the more agile French-designed Rafale rather than some of the more heavily armed and equipped fighters on offer.

There is therefore a danger that institutional preferences, deriving from India's highly individualised service cultures, may come to preempt the exigencies of national security. In a society marked by relatively harmonious civil-military relations, one could argue that intra-service competition may paradoxically lead to positive outcomes. Individual services, through their active lobbying of the civilian leadership, infuse the debate with high-level military expertise, and generate vital information. The civilian leadership finds itself both empowered as a neutral arbiter, and better informed in its own decision-making. This is predicated, however, on the notion that the military leadership has unfettered access to the highest policymaking circles, and that the civilian leadership has the requisite knowledge and expertise in order to arbitrate effectively and clearly define the nation's key defense needs. Unfortunately, in India, both of these preconditions are conspicuous by their absence.

## **THE INSTITUTIONALISED IMPEDIMENTS TO INDIA'S MILITARY RISE**

India's dysfunctional civil-military relations form the cankerous root of virtually every problem affecting India's military modernisation. Old Nehruvian fears of creeping pretorianism have led to a highly unwieldy and cumbersome system which has had an acutely deleterious effect on doctrinal and organisational development. Fearful of a drift towards a militaristic state in the vein of Pakistan, India's post-independence

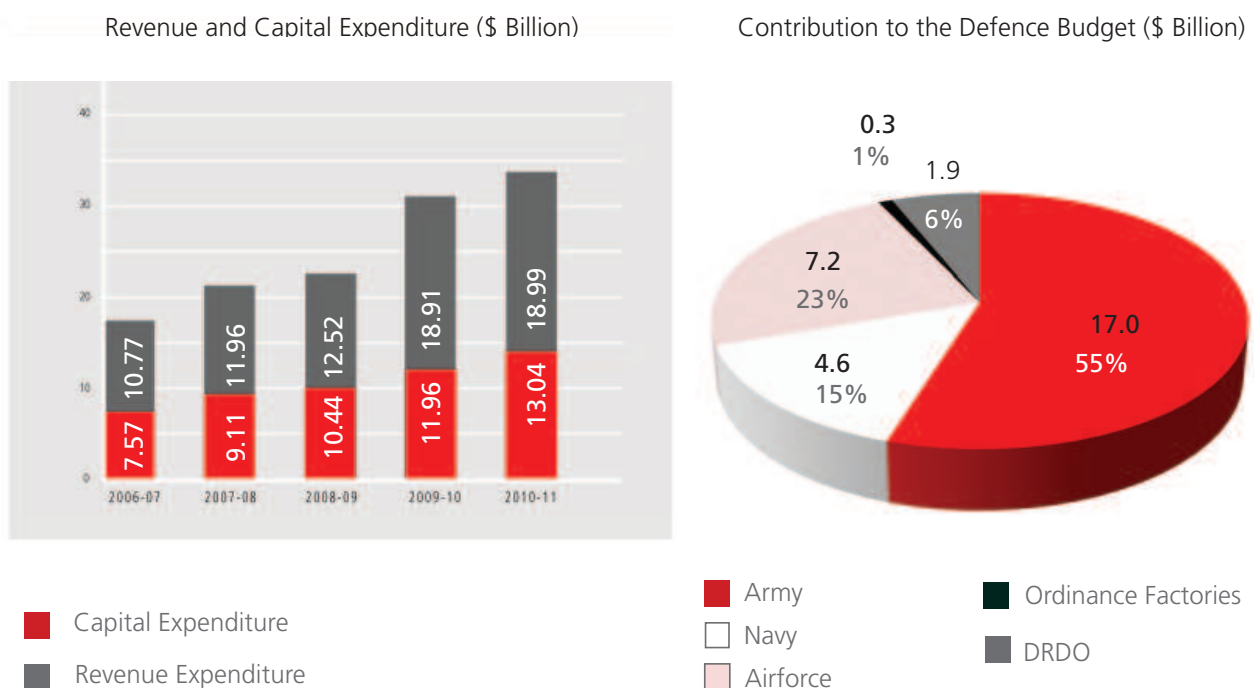
leaders rigorously implemented tight bureaucratic control of the young nation's armed forces.

The Raj-era post of Commander-in-Chief of the Indian military was abolished, and the service headquarters were downgraded to become attached offices, organisationally external to the MOD and therefore removed from major decision-making. Whilst it is natural that over time, concerns about the distribution of military power within a state become institutionalised, shaping the political elite's opinions about military power, in India this has led to a state of affairs in which Indian military power is evidently growing, but in an organic, almost haphazard way, with no single agency that can oversee the process and plan for future contingencies. The prolonged absence of a Chief of Defence staff, despite a widespread recognition of its urgent necessity, means that the prime forum for inter-service discussion continues to be the Chief of Staff Committee (COSC), which has no decision-making powers and is frequently riven by internal squabbles. This was made painfully apparent during the 1999 Kargil War, where personal differences between the higher ranks of the Indian Army and Air Force were aired in public. In private, Indian officers,

while not questioning civilian control over the military, bemoan the lack of effective cross-pollination of national security structures, and feel unheard by an understaffed bureaucracy which has little expertise or time for strategic matters. The problem seems to be not so much the civil-military relationship in itself (i.e. between the military and elected officials) but rather the extent of technocratic ossification which has occurred over the years and which, in the view of the military, presents a formidable bureaucratic barrier dividing them from a political leadership that tends to focus rather narrowly on domestic, and electoral, issues.

This state of affairs, naturally, impacts negatively on inter-service relations. While each arm of India's military pays lip service to jointness as an aspirational concept, each service prefers to plan and train in private, rather than genuinely seeking operational synergy. The Army, in particular, which is preoccupied with maintaining its lion's share of the defense budget (over 50 percent), demands jointness on its own terms, with the Air Force providing a ground support role, and the Navy ferrying Army troops abroad, or applying seawards pressure on a land-based foe.

**Figure 1: The Composition of India's Defense Budget (2010-2011)**



Source: Indian Ministry of Defense. (<http://mod.nic.in/>)

The likelihood of the Army agreeing to cede operational control of a specific mission to the Navy or Air Force appears particularly remote. The Air Force, for its part, hankers after air defense and air dominance, and harbours the firm conviction that the attachment of aircraft to ground units would be counter-productive, stymying the Air Force's range and mobility, while reducing its numerical advantage over its Pakistani counterpart. Tensions still occasionally surface between the Navy and Air Force over the historically sensitive issue of maritime aviation and the Navy, which remains the Cinderella service with only 15 percent of the overall defense budget, struggles to make its case for the creation of a proper Marine Corps in the face of staunch Army opposition and political aloofness. Each service promulgates its own doctrine, and there is, as of yet, no official white paper which could serve as a point of departure for India's thinking in terms of defense.

## **IN SEARCH OF STRATEGY**

Several observers, both in India and abroad, have noted that the country is in urgent need of a comprehensive National Strategic Review which clearly lays out threat assessments, while articulating India's needs and priorities. India's armed forces currently face a plethora of challenges, both internal and external. Amongst the internal challenges figure insurgencies in India's northeastern hinterlands, a restive population in a heavily militarised Kashmir, and the slow grinding war which India's gargantuan paramilitary apparatus is currently waging against the Naxalite movement across a large swathe of its territory. Externally, India is confronted with an unstable Pakistan, which will increasingly rely on high-end asymmetric warfare and nuclear brinkmanship in order to offset India's growing conventional superiority, and with a rapidly militarising China which breathes heavily at its door, sporadically reiterating its claims to tracts of Indian soil. While India's military budget has grown considerably over the past ten years, the gulf between New Delhi and Beijing in terms of military funding has in fact widened, rather than narrowed. This resource gap is compounded by China's vast strides in terms of infrastructure development along its side of the 4,057 km Sino-Indian border.

This has been accomplished through the groundbreaking completion of the Golmud-Lhasa railway in 2006, which is to be extended in the course of the current Five Years Plan to the border towns of Nyingchi, Xigaze and Natung. This will push the Chinese railway right up to the Line of Actual Control, skirting both the Indian-controlled states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Roads are also highly developed along the Chinese side of the border, which has led to situations of glaring disparity, in which PLA patrols can drive up in armoured SUVs up to the very edges of the contested zone while their Indian counterparts are forced to undergo grueling treks through hills, rivers and mountains, on foot or by mule train. Increasingly aware of the growing imbalance along the border, New Delhi is raising two new mountain divisions and planning for a new mountain strike corps. Two squadrons of air superiority Su-30K I fighters have been deployed at the Tezpur air base in Assam, and India is currently assembling battalions of scouts from local tribal populations in the region. The Indian Government also gave the go-ahead in 2010 for the construction of several new strategic roads in the Northeast. These efforts point to a more proactive stance towards China, and to a desire to reestablish greater force parity along the border. Strategic pundits routinely evoke the necessity for India to plan for a 'two-front war', and for India to maintain a heightened degree of military preparedness.

Unfortunately, there is no evidence of any serious tri-service planning or wargaming which could work towards countering India's so-called two front threat. Instead, each service plans for its own contingencies as usual. The Indian Navy frets over the possibility of increased Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean, and particularly over what commentators have come to refer to as the 'string of pearls' – those countries in the Indian Ocean, as diverse as Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, in which China has attempted to establish 'nodes of influence' by means of enhanced economic and security ties. In some cases this has led to joint port construction or enlargement deals, such as with Pakistan at Gwadar, and with Sri Lanka at Hambantota. For the time being, however, none of these ports have yet taken on an overt military role, and most informed analysts concur that now, at least, China's string of pearls strategy is more economic than militaristic in nature.

Several, more immediate threats are emerging in the Indian Ocean. One is the proliferation of anti-access weapons, which threaten to constrict the Indian Navy's freedom of maneuver, whether it be via vaulting China's precision-strike systems, placed in places such as Tibet or Yunnan, from land to sea; or through Pakistan's use of submarines and anti-ship missiles as cost-effective force multipliers against India's larger, but increasingly vulnerable, fleet. As Sino-Pakistani naval cooperation gains impetus, the extension of India's two-front threat from land to sea is a destabilising evolution which Indian armed forces will be compelled to confront through Air Force/Navy jointness sooner or later. Another destabilising trend lies in the nuclear realm, where both Beijing and Islamabad have been actively modernising, and in Pakistan's case, enlarging their arsenals. India's pursuit of a Ballistic Missile Defense System and both nations' flirtation with dual-use delivery systems at sea risks severely undermining crisis stability. The nuclearisation of Pakistan's fleet is another strategic wild card, which will most likely occur in the course of the upcoming decade, and which needs to be integrated into New Delhi's operational planning.

Unfortunately, India's security priorities are still largely defined by the more static contingencies imposed by territorial defense, as well as by the Indian Army's struggle to determine how it can successfully fulfill wartime objectives without crossing one of Pakistan's ever-shifting nuclear thresholds. The Air Force, for its part, places a great emphasis on cross-border strikes and air defense, and appears reluctant to join hands with the Navy in order to fully exploit the nation's considerable potential in terms of maritime airpower.

### **DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS, GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS: THE UNCERTAINTIES OF INDIA'S MILITARY RISE**

India's military modernisation finds itself at a critical juncture. New Delhi faces numerous external and internal challenges, which cannot be merely addressed by the continuous provision of resources devoid of any form of strategic direction. In order to fulfill its global aspirations and unmoor itself from its subcontinental tethers, India will need to engage in a transformational overhaul of its institutions and procedures. A loosening of bureaucratic control over the armed forces would give birth to a more functional civil-military relationship and foster greater tri-service synchrony, both in terms of warfighting and procurement. The nation's convoluted defense acquisition process, which rigorously promotes autarky by requiring foreign defense firms to source over 30 percent of their products from India, hampers India's acquisition of much needed advanced equipment, is also in urgent need of reform. Finally, greater competence is required at the Ministry of Defense, which has traditionally been plagued by corruption and bureaucratic sloth. In a depressing display of inefficiency, a combined \$5.5 billion worth of procurement funds were returned, unspent, to the Ministry of Defence's treasury, from 2002 to 2008. At a time when certain sectors of India's armed forces are in desperate need of new equipment, such malpractice will become increasingly intolerable.

Rapid evolutions in the region's strategic environment will also undoubtedly prompt changes in the composition of India's armed forces, with a gradual rebalancing in favour of the historically underprivileged Air Force and Navy, and a slow dilution of the weight of the Army. If India wishes to become a great military power, it will need to break out of its continental shackles and take on the trappings of a truly oceanic power. Only once it has acquired an expeditionary capability will it be able to emerge as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean and beyond. For the time being, the Indian Navy has been at the vanguard of this effort, aiding in numerous humanitarian or custodial operations, but the military still lacks the ability to project power into heavily contested environments far from its shores. Until that day, the greatest challenges India will ever have to face on the road towards military great power status lie within – not without. ■