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## Two-front War: A Convenient Fiction

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Bharat Karnad

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Illustration by Tanmoy Chakraborty

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It is almost de rigueur for a newly appointed military Chief of Staff to ritually make certain statements, for instance, about the supposed readiness of his armed service to fight a "two-front war". General Manoj M. Naravane, however, displayed a disarming confidence in making them. Asked how he planned to do so, he said the "dual task formations" would switch between confronting Pakistan in the west and taking on China in the north and northeast. "In case of simultaneous threat from both directions," he elaborated, "there would always be a primary front [where] the bulk of our forces and resources will be concentrated [while] on the other front, we will adopt a more deterrent posture." Trouble is, the military considers Pakistan the primary threat and accordingly invests in, and deploys, its resources.

A real two-front war-fighting capacity would require India to have unlimited financial resources to afford a comprehensively capable military, self-sufficiency in arms, and the industrial muscle for surge production of all military hardware, nuts and screws up, to quickly fill voids in military stores and lost equipment. But for an army with reportedly only 10 days of ammunition expended at intense rates of fire, Naravane's is a remarkable sanguine assessment based on flawed assumptions. Namely, that war with China will be limited and unfold linearly and along expected lines, that the terrains in, and weaponry and skill sets required for, the two fronts are similar, and that Indian troops are versatile enough to fight the Pakistan army in Kashmir one day and be airlifted to tackle the Chinese army in the Himalayas the next.

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Such views are propagated essentially to preserve and legitimate the existing dated and dysfunctional force structure. Combat arms within this structure constitute vested, often clashing, bureaucratic interests that have reached a modus vivendi they do not want disturbed. Thus, modernising and maintaining three-armoured strike corps with heavy tanks as spear head account for a large chunk (19 to 26 per cent) of the defence budget and, owing to funding constraints, is at the expense of three desperately needed

specialised offensive mountain corps. Stuck in plains/ desert warfare concepts, shifting resources to, say, Russian T-14 light tank-equipped mountain corps able to take the fight to China on the Tibetan Plateau is opposed even if it means ineffectively working the T-72s from their redoubts on the high-altitude northern Sikkim plains where, on any given morning, 40 per cent of them are unable to cold start.

"Fighter mafias" run major air forces, including the Indian Air Force. In IAF, they phased out the bomber component in the 1970s after the medium Canberra bomber ended service. Short and medium range combat aircraft, however, have been bought pell-mell from every imaginable foreign source. It has obtained, in the process, a fleet without any strategic reach or clout, and so diverse it is nightmarish to upkeep in peacetime, what to speak of in war.

In fact, Soviet Union's offer in 1971 of the Tu-22 Backfire strategic bomber, which would have been a ready delivery system for the Indian nuclear bomb tested and acquired three years later, was spurned and MiG-23BN selected instead. Since the mid-1990s, the Russian advanced intercontinental range Tu-160 Blackjack bomber available for the asking has likewise been ignored. Indeed, dog in the manger-like IAF even prevented Indian Navy from securing the Tu-22 and the strategic bombing role it had discarded, leaving the country with aircraft optimally usable only against Pakistan.

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So, India finds itself in the sorry situation of "cavalry generals" and fighter jocks inflating the negligible threat from Pakistan, skewing the government's procurement and other military priorities, and using the two-front war scenario to justify this system that has obtained for the country a severely limited, financially ruinous war-fighting capability, increased vulnerability to China and imperilled national security. Such distribution of military attention and resources may suit the government of the day. Whether it serves the national interest is another matter.

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