

The (mis)management of India's higher direction of war



The Indian Air Force is authorized 42 squadrons of fighter aircraft. The Indian Navy is authorized two aircraft carriers. The Indian Army is authorized four strike corps. Have you ever wondered how all this is decided? How much ammunition and spares are stocked by the armed forces? How many days of war are our soldiers prepared to fight for?

“War is not merely a political act, but also a real political instrument, a continuation of political commerce, a carrying out of the same by other means,” observed the 19th century Prussian military thinker and strategist Carl von Clausewitz. This incontestable maxim in the field of strategy means that politics decides war. In India, where the military has had no political role since Independence, the actions of the armed forces are legitimately guided solely by the directions of the top political leadership.

Considering that India is surrounded by two nuclear-armed adversaries in an unstable neighbourhood, and now lies in the theatre of contestation between two global powers, the United States and China, the directions given to the military from the political leadership ought to be at the centre of national discourse.

Alas, that is not the case.

Unlike most Western democracies, India does not have an official national security strategy. In 2017, the Narendra Modi government announced with great fanfare the formation of a high-powered Defence Planning Committee headed by the national security advisor, Ajit Doval. It also comprised the principal secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, the foreign and expenditure secretaries and the three military chiefs, among others, and was supposed to produce a national security strategy and a strategic defence review. Instead, the committee sputtered to its death within a few months, the draft national security strategy placed before it smothered by abandonment as the country went into a general election in 2019.

After Modi was re-elected in 2019 on a campaign that rode heavily on the valorous deeds of the Indian military, Doval's status as NSA was elevated from that of minister of state to a cabinet rank. Whispers in Delhi corridors hinted that this was to ensure that the former spy did not have a status lower than that of the newly appointed foreign minister, S. Jaishankar, who had been the foreign secretary in Modi's first stint.

Meanwhile, the prime minister announced another major defence reform from the ramparts of Red Fort on Independence Day that year—that Gen. Bipin Rawat would become India's first "chief of defence staff". The Defence Planning Committee was dead and buried, and all military reform would now be shepherded by Gen Rawat. However, at the time of his death in an unfortunate helicopter crash nearly two years later, there was little to show in that regard. India's national security strategy had not even been on his agenda.

Now, eight months on from Rawat's demise, the Modi government is yet to appoint his successor, raising questions about its commitment to the so-called "biggest reform in defence in independent India".

With the political leadership unable to produce a national security strategy—or having dispensed with the idea after toying with it—the only document issued by the government that provides explicit political directions to the military is the Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive. This document is to be issued every five years, but the policy is that the existing directive remains in effect till a new one is approved. The Operational Directive in force today is one that was produced in 2009 under the United Progressive Alliance government, approved by the cabinet committee on security under Manmohan Singh and issued by then defence minister A.K. Antony.

The world has changed dramatically since 2009, and so have India and its geostrategic ambitions. With our political leadership obsessed with militant nationalism and military strength, eight years should have been enough time for the Modi government to issue a new Operational Directive. To allow the armed forces to work on a set of directives issued 13 years ago reflects an utterly casual and lackadaisical approach from the government towards national security.

The 2009 directive, [as per former army chief Gen. N.C. Vij](#), lays down that, "We should be prepared to fight on both fronts simultaneously a war at 30 days (intense) and 60 days (normal) rates". An 'intense' rate of war fighting consumes three times the ammunition and spares than at the normal rate. This directive means that India's armed forces should be prepared to fight against China and Pakistan simultaneously for 50 days of 'intense' war.

We know, from media interviews by the late Manohar Parrikar and Gen. Rawat, that India's military did not have stocks for 10 days of war fighting when surgical strikes were launched across the Line of Control in September 2016. Even in late 2019, [Gen. Rawat clarified](#) that his aim was to build up stocks for 10 days of intense warfighting to deal with Pakistan, while fighting with China would need stocks for 30 days of intense war, which would be built up later. These hard financial realities rule out waging a full-fledged war against China, leave alone fighting one simultaneously on two fronts. With the border crisis in Ladakh showing no signs of resolution over the past 26 months, issuing a new Operational Directive should have been the top-most priority.

It is not that an effort has not been made in the last eight years to issue a new Operational Directive. But that effort has not been backed by political will or understanding at the highest levels of the government.

Before arriving at a new Operational Directive, a draft is put up by the armed forces, which is then passed on to the defence ministry. After negotiations and discussions between the armed forces and the defence ministry to the satisfaction of the defence minister, a final draft is then approved by the cabinet committee on security, which comprises the Prime Minister and the home, finance, external affairs and defence ministers. This is then issued as the Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive to the armed forces. (Significantly, the Operational Directive contains nothing on the internal security duties of the armed forces, whether in Kashmir or in the north-eastern states.)

I spoke to five military officials and bureaucrats involved in the process of finalizing the Operational Directive, none of whom were willing to be named. The first attempt to issue the directive was made in 2015 when Parrikar was the defence minister. After deliberations between the defence ministry and the armed forces that led to heavy editing and rearranging of the original draft—the submission from the armed forces was a variation of the 2009 directive—a final draft was put up to Parrikar. He rejected the draft, with a handwritten note saying it did not reflect any of the changes he was trying to bring in the armed forces in terms of procurement processes, use of technology and other reforms. The ball was back in the defence services' court and the back and forth with the ministry continued. The matter never reached the level of the defence minister again, even as India got three new defence ministers in the next four years.

The process picked up traction again in 2020 after Gen. Rawat became the CDS and secretary of the newly created Department of Military Affairs. He wanted to take the lead on the document, but the Department of Defence considered it to be in its domain. The conflict was resolved by the intervention of defence minister Rajnath Singh, who ruled in favour of the Department of Defence, which is headed by the defence secretary. The matter was extensively deliberated, and consultations with all stakeholders lead to a consensus that the armed forces should be prepared for 20 days of intense war and 10 days of normal war, simultaneously on both fronts. This was a major shift from the 2009 directive and would dictate the new manning levels and future procurement plans and stocking policy of the armed forces.

There were some disagreements over whether to include international cooperation by the armed forces in an Operational Directive, and over the preparatory time needed by the military to wage a war, but the draft was approved by Rajnath Singh and sent to the cabinet committee on security for approval. The document was returned by the CCS as it was not seen to be attuned with the national security reforms being planned by the government. The matter has not been revived since, and the armed forces continue to plan and prepare for war based on directions contained in a document from 2009.

To answer the question raised at the beginning, in theory, our soldiers are supposed to be prepared for a war of 40 days of intense fighting. But, in practice, they barely have the wherewithal to sustain them for 10 days of war. That is how the (mis)management of the higher direction of war from our political leadership is playing out for the armed forces.

The generals may feel misdirected and clueless, but the consequences of a military disaster, as Clausewitz warned, will have to be borne by the political leadership.

Obiter dictum

Talking of the armed forces, why did Pakistan see military coups and dictatorships while India remained democratic after 1947? After all, the two armies were born of the same British colonial system, the two countries emerged from the same governance model and the people had similar social and economic mores. The best book to explore that question is [Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy Since Independence](#) (Orient Blackswan, 2015) by Yale University professor Steven Wilkinson.

Lead image: A file photo of (foreground, from left) vice-president M. Venkaiah Naidu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, defence minister Nirmala Sitharaman, former chief of defence staff the late Gen. Bipin Rawat and then chief of naval staff Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba at a Martyrs Day ceremony at Rajghat on 30 January 2019. Photo by Arvind Yadav/Hindustan Times via Getty Images

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