

BROOKINGS

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The Drag on India's Military Growth

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Policy Brief #176

India's remarkable economic growth and newfound access to arms from abroad have raised the prospect of a major rearmament of the country. But without several policy and organizational changes, India's efforts to modernize its armed forces will not alter the country's ability to deal with critical security threats. Our research suggests that India's military modernization needs a transparent, legitimate and efficient procurement process. Further, a chief of defense staff could reconcile the competing priorities across the three military services. Finally, India's defense research agencies need to be subjected to greater oversight.

India's rapid economic growth and newfound access to military technology, especially by way of its rapprochement with the United States, have raised hopes of a military revival in the country. Against this optimism about the rise of Indian military power stands the reality that India has not been able to alter its military-strategic position despite being one of the world's largest importers of advanced conventional weapons for three decades.

We believe that civil-military relations in India have focused too heavily on one side of the problem – how to ensure civilian control over the armed forces, while neglecting the other – how to build and field an effective military force. This imbalance in civil-military relations has caused military modernization and reforms to suffer from a lack of political guidance, disunity of purpose and effort and material and intellectual corruption.



Above: Reuters/Brijesh Singh - Indian paramilitary troopers hold their weapons as they prepare to march inside the historic Taj Mahal in Agra.

The Effects of Strategic Restraint the Effects of Strategic Restraint

Sixty years after embarking on a rivalry with Pakistan, India has not been able to alter its strategic relationship with a country less than one-fifth its size. India's many counterinsurgencies have lasted twenty years on an average, double the worldwide average. Since the 1998 nuclear tests, reports of a growing missile gap with Pakistan have called into question the quality of India's nuclear deterrent. The high point of Indian military history – the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971– therefore, stands in sharp contrast to the persistent inability of the country to raise effective military forces.

No factor more accounts for the haphazard nature of Indian military modernization than the lack of political leadership on defense, stemming from the doctrine of strategic restraint. Key political leaders rejected the use of force as an instrument of politics in favor of a policy of strategic restraint that minimized the importance of the military.

The Government of India held to its strong anti-militarism despite the reality of conflict and war that followed independence. Much has been made of the downgrading of the service chiefs in the protocol rank, but of greater consequence was the elevation of military science and research as essential to the long-term defense of India over the armed forces themselves. Nehru invited British physicist P.M.S. Blackett to examine the relationship between science and defense. Blackett came back with a report that called for capping Indian defense spending at 2 percent of GDP and limited military modernization. He also recommended state funding and ownership of military research laboratories and established his protégé, Daulat Singh Kothari, as the head of the labs.

Indian defense spending decreased during the 1950s. Of the three services, the Indian Navy received greater attention with negotiations for the acquisition of India's first aircraft carrier. The Indian Air Force acquired World War II surplus Canberra transport. The Indian Army, the biggest service by a wide margin, went to Congo on a UN peacekeeping mission, but was neglected overall. India had its first defense procurement scandal when buying old jeeps and experienced its first civil-military crisis when an army chief threatened to resign protesting political interference in military matters. The decade culminated in the government's 'forward policy' against China, which Nehru foisted on an unprepared army, and led to the war of 1962 with China that ended in a humiliating Indian defeat.

The foremost lesson of 1962 was that India could not afford further military retrenchment. The Indian government launched a significant military expansion program that doubled the size of the army and raised a fighting air force. With the focus shifting North, the Indian Navy received less attention. A less recognized lesson of the war was that political interference in military matters ought to be limited. The military – and especially the army – asked for and received operational and institutional autonomy, a fact most visible in the wars of 1965 and 1971.

The problem, however, was that the political leadership did not suddenly become more comfortable with the military as an institution; they remained wary of the possibility of a coup d'etat and militarism more generally.

The Indian civil-military relations landscape has changed marginally since. In the eighties, there was a degree of political-military confluence in the Rajiv Gandhi government: Rajiv appointed a military buff, Arun Singh, as the minister of state for defense. At the same time, Krishnaswami Sundarji, an exceptional officer, became the army chief. Together they launched an ambitious program of military modernization in response to Pakistani rearmament and nuclearization. Pakistan's nuclearization allowed that country to escalate the subconventional conflict in Kashmir while stemming Indian ability to escalate to a general war, where it had superiority. India is yet to emerge from this stability-instability paradox.

We do not know why Rajiv Gandhi agreed to the specific kind of military modernization that occurred in the mid-eighties, but then stepped back from using this capacity in 1987 during the Brasstacks crisis. Sundarji later wrote in a veiled work of fiction and told his many friends that Brasstacks was the last chance India had to dominate a non-nuclear Pakistan.

The puzzle of Brasstacks stands in a line of similar decisions. In 1971, India did not push the advantage of its victory in the eastern theatre to the West. Instead, New Delhi, under uberrealist Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, signed on to an equivocal agreement at Simla that committed both sides to peaceful resolution of future disputes without any enforcement measures. India's decision to wait 24 years between its first nuclear test in 1974 and the second set of tests in 1998 is equally puzzling. Why did it not follow through after the 1974 test, and why did it test in 1998?

Underlying these puzzles is a remarkable preference for strategic restraint. Indian leaders simply have not seen the use of force as a useful instrument of politics. This foundation of ambivalence informs Indian defense policy, and consequently its military modernization and reform efforts.

To be sure, military restraint in a region as volatile as South Asia is wise and has helped persuade the great powers to accommodate India's rise, but it does not help military planning. Together with the separation of the armed forces from the government, divisions among the services and between the services and other related agencies, and the inability of the military to seek formal support for policies it deems important, India's strategic restraint has served to deny political guidance to the efforts of the armed forces to modernize. As wise as strategic restraint may be, Pakistan, India's primary rival, hardly believes it to be true. Islamabad prepares as if India were an aggressive power and this has a real impact on India's security.

Imbalance in Civil-Military Relations

What suffices for a military modernization plan is a wish list of weapon systems amounting to as much as \$100 billion from the three services and hollow announcements of coming breakthroughs from the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO), the premier agency for military research in India.

The process is illustrative. The armed forces propose to acquire certain weapon systems. The political leadership and the civilian bureaucracy, especially the Ministry of Finance, react to these requests, agreeing on some and rejecting others. A number of dysfunctions ensue.

First, the services see things differently and their plans are essentially uncoordinated. Coming off the experience of the Kargil war and Operation Parakram, the Indian Army seems to have arrived at a Cold Start doctrine, seeking to find some fighting space between subconventional conflict and nuclear exchange in the standoff with Pakistan. The doctrine may not be official policy, but it informs the army's wish list, where attack helicopters, tanks and long-range artillery stand out as marquee items. The Indian Air Force (IAF), meanwhile, is the primary instrument of the country's nuclear deterrent. The IAF's close second role is air superiority and air defense. Close air support, to which the IAF has belatedly agreed and which is essential to the army's Cold Start doctrine, is a distant fourth.

The Indian Navy wants to secure the country's sea-lanes of communications, protect its energy supplies and guard its trade routes. It wants further to be the vehicle of Indian naval diplomacy and sees a role in the anti-piracy efforts in the Malacca

Straits and the Horn of Africa. What is less clear is how the Indian Navy might contribute in the event of a war with Pakistan. The navy would like simply to brush past the problem of Pakistan and reach for the grander projects. Accordingly, the Indian Navy's biggest procurement order is a retrofitted aircraft carrier from Russia.

India's three services have dramatically different views of what their role in India's security should be, and there is no political effort to ensure this coordination. Cold Start remains an iffy proposition. India's nuclear deterrent remains tethered to a single delivery system: fighter aircraft. Meanwhile, the Indian Army's energies are dissipated with counterinsurgency duties, which might increase manifold if the army is told to fight the rising leftist insurgency, the Naxalites. And all this at a time when the primary security threat to the country has been terrorism. After the Mumbai attacks, the Indian government and the people of India are said to have resolved to tackle the problem headlong, but today the government's minister in charge of internal security, Palaniappan Chidambaram, is more under siege himself than seizing the hidden enemy.

Second, despite repeated calls for and commissions into reforms in the higher defense structure, planning, intelligence, defense production and procurement, the Indian national security establishment remains fragmented and uncoordinated. The government and armed forces have succeeded in reforms primed by additions to the defense budget but failed to institute reforms that require changes in organization and priorities.

The Kargil Review Committee, and the Group of Ministers report that followed, for example, recommended a slew of reforms. The changes most readily implemented were those that created new commands, agencies and task forces, essentially linear expansion backed by new budgetary allocations. The changes least likely to occur were those required changes in the hierarchy.

The most common example of tough reform is the long-standing recommendation for a chief of defense staff. A military chief, as opposed to the service chiefs, could be a solution to the problem that causes the three services not to reconcile their priorities. However, political leaders have rejected the creation of the position of military commander-in-chief, mainly for fear of giving a military officer too much power. Instead of a chief of defense staff, the government has tried to install an integrated defense staff that is supposed to undertake reconciliation between the services, but which really is a toothless body with little influence.

Lastly, the Ministry of Defense has a finance section deputed by the Ministry of Finance. This section oversees all defense expenditures, even after they have been authorized. Once the cabinet has approved a spending item, what authority does the section have to turn down requests? However, the finance section raises questions of propriety, wisdom and policy that should under normal circumstances be under the purview of the defense minister.

No Legitimate Procurement Process

Corruption in weapons procurement has been a political issue since the mid-1980s, when allegations of a series of paybacks in the purchase of Bofors artillery, HDW submarines and other items mobilized an opposition that removed Rajiv Gandhi from power in 1989. Since then, Indian political leaders have tried hard not to appear to be corrupt, going out of their way to slow down new purchases.

However, corruption is still a problem, as shown in the 2001 Tehelka expose of political leaders accepting bribes in return for defense contracts. Recently, Uday Bhaskar, the Indian Navy officer and defense analyst, wrote biting that for a number of

years now the armed forces, which desperately need modernization, have been returning unspent funds to the treasury.

There is widespread recognition that corruption is morally venal and detrimental to the cause of Indian security. We believe, however, that the second- and third-order problems of corruption have unacknowledged impact on military modernization and capacity. The Defense Procurement Manual and Procedures on the Ministry of Defense's website are the first steps in the right direction, but the Indian government has generally failed to build a transparent and legitimate procurement process.

The deep roots of corruption extend to military research and development and to the heart of India's foreign relations. Since the mid-1970s, however, the DRDO embarked on a number of ambitious and well-funded projects to build a fighter aircraft, a tank, and missiles. All three projects floundered.

While the aircraft and tank projects have largely failed, the missile program is considered successful. The reputation of the success carried the director of the missile program, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, to the presidency. Yet in 2010, no Indian missile in the arsenal of the armed forces has managed to alter the strategic equation with Pakistan or China. The Prithvi short-range missile is not useful because of its range and liquid fuel needs. The longer-range Agni models have gone through numerous tests without entering the army's arsenal. Other variations, such as Nag and Akash, have limited strategic purpose.

The virtual monopoly over military research in state-owned labs has meant that the abundant energies of the Indian private sector have remained outside the defense industry. Where in the United States, small and medium-sized defense contractors form the backbone of the research complex, India is far from thinking along those lines. Despite recent efforts to include the private sector through various schemes, there continues to be distrust of private industry in the Indian defense establishment. We believe it is easier for a private foreign supplier to win a contract with the Ministry of Defense than it is for a small private Indian company to do so.

For decades, the Indian government has accepted dishonest promises made by DRDO as the basis for providing billions of dollars of support because of the persisting ideology of autarky. The greatest success of military research in India comes not from the DRDO, but from the Atomic Energy Commission, which built the nuclear devices. But the government has been unwilling to subject DRDO to public accountability. Instead, the head of DRDO serves as the defense minister's scientific adviser. The two positions – of supplier and adviser – bring inherent conflict of interest, but this has not been an issue in India at all.

The second pattern of systemic corruption comes from the inability of the Indian defense system to wean itself from the supply of Soviet/Russian equipment. The reasons why India initially went to the Soviet Union for weapons are well-known. The United States chose Pakistan, India went to the Soviet Union. But that political decision was reinforced by ideas about the corruption-free nature of the state-owned Soviet defense industry and the profit-mindedness of western, and especially American, firms.

This characterization has always been untrue. Soviet/Russian suppliers have engaged in as much corruption as western firms, but because the Soviet Union was a closed system, the corruption – which was reported first in the press in the supplier countries – was never really reported in the Soviet Union. This tradition continues, though the Russian free press has been more critical of the country's defense deals. Indeed, those who served as Indian 'agents' for the Soviet firms have highlighted the better business practice of Russians, a laughable matter in light of India's recent travails with the retrofit and sale of the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Gorshkov.

The tendency is reiterated in Indian preferences in dealing with the West as well. Western firms have always been seen as money-grubbing, an opinion that exists across the political spectrum and is prevalent in the civilian bureaucracy. New Delhi seems to prefer government-to-government foreign military sales, which are in turn causing some degree of protest from users who want longer-term maintenance arrangements with suppliers.

The political rapprochement between India and the United States has not yet filtered into the system for attitudes to change dramatically. India's growing military supply relationship with Israel is instructive. The most successful Israeli firm in the Indian market is Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), a state-owned company. IAI was quick to adopt the Russian model of operation in India: offering the DRDO co-development opportunities to win contracts. In contrast, American firms are reluctant to work with, let alone transfer high-end technology to a state owned enterprise. They would prefer to set up a subsidiary in India, which could retain control of the technology.

India has been one of the biggest importers of advanced conventional weapons in the last thirty years, but this sustained rearmament has not altered India's strategic position. The armed forces push for modernization, but do not have the authority to mount the national campaign necessary for transforming the security condition of the country. Budget increases delivered by a rapidly expanding economy and access to western technology previously denied to India have led to optimism about Indian military power, but the dysfunction in India's civil-military relations reduces the impact of rearmament. Arming without aiming has some purpose in persuading other great powers of India's benign rise, but it cannot be the basis of military planning.

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