

MILITARY INTERVENTION AND HUMANITARIAN RELIEF: PRESENT CAPABILITIES AND FUTURE REQUIREMENTS

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Within few hours of the devastating Himalayan earthquake on 25th April, the Government of India sprung to action providing aid to the people of Nepal with Op Maitri (friendship), a large-scale rescue and relief operation. Several C-130J Hercules, C-17 Globemaster aircraft and ten Mi-17V5 helicopters of the Indian Air Force (IAF) transported doctors, mobile hospitals, personnel of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and ferried water, food, medicines and tents. In return flights, they evacuated almost 5,000 stranded Indian and foreign nationals.

In early-April 2015, India evacuated 5,600 displaced persons from Yemen under Operation Rahat (relief). Of these, 4,640 were from India and 960 from 41 friendly countries, including citizens of Britain, France and the United States. They were evacuated by C-17 aircraft of the IAF flying from Djibouti, Ethiopia; by Air India aircraft flying from Sana'a; and, by sea

onboard ships of the Indian Navy from Aden, Al Hudaydah and Al Mukalla ports in Yemen.

Both these operations were meticulously planned and efficiently executed. These were not merely humanitarian relief operations but also operations that showcased India's military intervention capabilities. It is not the first time that India has undertaken such operations. Starting with the two wars in Iraq in 1990 and 2003, through the conflicts in Lebanon (2006), Egypt, Libya and Yemen (2011) and Ukraine and Syria-Iraq (2014), the Indian armed forces and civil aviation personnel have been engaged in evacuating beleaguered Indian citizens from war zones.

Post-independence Interventions

Contrary to populist notions of the nation being imbued with a pacifist strategic culture, the Indian government has not hesitated to ask its

Military Intervention and Humanitarian Relief: Present Capabilities and Future Requirements

armed forces to intervene militarily several times since Independence, both internally and beyond India's shores, when such intervention was considered necessary in the national interest in order to achieve its foreign policy and national security objectives. The Army acted successfully to integrate Junagadh (1947), Hyderabad (Op Polo, 1948), Goa (Op Vijay, 1961) and Sikkim (1975) with the Indian Union as part of the nation building process. The Indian armed forces created the new nation of Bangladesh after the Pakistan army's genocide in East Pakistan in 1971 led to a popular uprising and 10 million refugees streamed into India.

India intervened in the Maldives and Sri Lanka at the behest of the governments of these countries and was ready to do so in Mauritius in 1983 when the government was under threat. India had airlifted 150,000 civilian workers from Iraq through Jordan during Gulf War I in what became known as the largest airlift after the Berlin airlift. Also, almost 5,000 civilian workers were evacuated by ship from Lebanon in 2006. In the wake of 2004 South East Asian tsunami, a large number of naval ships had set sail within three days to lead international

rescue and relief operations even though India's eastern sea board had itself suffered extensive loss of life and damage. For many years now, the Indian Navy has been part of the multi-national naval effort to keep Somalian piracy at bay off the Horn of Africa and has been patrolling the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait along with other friendly navies.

India's policy to intervene in India's regional neighbourhood in the 1980s became known as the Indira Doctrine. This muscular interventionism was at variance from the conciliatory Gujral Doctrine of the mid-1990s, which was also endorsed by the Vajpayee-led NDA government and then endorsed by the Manmohan Singh-led UPA regime. It remains to be seen whether there will be a change in India's policies now that a more pro-active government led by Prime Minister Modi has assumed power.

External threats and challenges have been gradually increasing. When the Taliban first came to power in Afghanistan, a perplexing question was what India would do if it ever became necessary to launch a military operation to rescue the Indian

ambassador or members of his staff from Kabul. Would India ask for American or Russian help? How would they respond? Or, would India have no option but to leave the embassy staff to the mercy of terrorist Jihadis? That contingency fortunately did not arise but another one did. Indian Airlines flight IC-814 was hijacked to and parked at Kandahar airfield for several days in the cold month of December 1999. The nation was forced to look on with helpless rage, as virtually no military options worth considering were available. That ignominious surrender to the Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorists prompted some soul searching. However, the government has been proceeding rather slowly in creating the required intervention capabilities.

Regional Responsibilities

Analysts the world over are now discussing the emergence of a resurgent India that will be a dominant power in Southern Asia. Bharat Verma, former Editor, Indian Defence Review, wrote in 2003: "... our political aim should be the dominance of Asia by 2020 as an economic power backed by

a world class military." In keeping with its rapidly growing strategic interests and regional responsibilities, India may soon need to join other friendly countries to intervene militarily in its regional neighbourhood when the situation so demands. While India would prefer to do so with a clear mandate from the United Nations Security Council and under the UN flag, it may not be averse to joining 'coalitions of the willing' when its vital national interests are threatened and consensus in the Security Council proves hard to achieve.

Though it will be a gradual and long-drawn process, it is quite likely that a cooperative international security framework will eventually emerge from the ashes of the ongoing conflicts. Stemming from the need for contingency planning, particularly in support of its forces deployed for United Nations (UN) peace-keeping and peace-support duties and for limited power projection, India will need to raise and maintain in a permanent state of quick-reaction readiness adequate forces to participate in international coalitions in India's area of strategic interest.

Military Intervention and Humanitarian Relief: Present Capabilities and Future Requirements

The aim of such operations will be to further India's national security and foreign policy objectives, to support international non-proliferation efforts, and to join the international community to act decisively against banned insurgent outfits like the al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Tayebba or even rogue regimes like the one in Yemen. International non-proliferation initiatives, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Container Security Initiative (CSI) particularly cannot succeed in the Southern Asian and Indian Ocean regions without Indian participation as a member or as a partner providing outside support. As an aspiring regional power, India will also need to consider its responsibilities towards undertaking humanitarian military interventions when these are morally justified. Other requirements that are difficult to visualise accurately today but would further India's foreign policy objectives or enhance national security interests in future, will also justify the acquisition of military intervention capabilities.

Force Structure Required

The late General K. Sundarji, former

COAS, had often spoken of converting an existing infantry division to an air assault division by about the year 2000. One of the existing divisions had been designated as an air assault division in Exercise Brass Tracks IV in 1987 even though its air assault capabilities were notional. Though the idea was certainly not ahead of its time, the shoestring budgets of the 1990s did not allow the army to proceed to practically implement the concept. Now the time has come to translate his vision into reality.

Lt Gen Vinay Shankar (Retd.) has written, "Some years ago the army had drawn up an approach paper projecting the requirement of two air-mobile divisions... This is now a definite requirement and the proposal ought to be followed up." Other analysts are also of the view that India needs to put in place a fairly expansive expeditionary capability. Bharat Karnad is of the view: "At the very least, a genuine expeditionary force would have to comprise two division equivalent forces, increasing over time to 5-6 division equivalent for distant employment..."

Lt Gen Satish Nambiar, Force

Commander, UNPROFOR in former Yugoslavia in 1992-93, has suggested the following components for a 'rapid reaction task force' as he calls it:

- A tri-Service corps sized headquarters.
- A land forces component to include an airborne brigade, and a light armoured or mechanised division comprising an air transportable armoured brigade equipped with light tanks and infantry combat vehicles, an amphibious brigade and an air transportable infantry brigade.
- Army aviation elements, assault engineers, communications units and logistics elements.
- A Naval component that desirably includes an aircraft carrier, appropriate surface and sub-surface craft and aerial maritime capability.
- An Air Force component that includes strike aircraft, helicopters and strategic airlift capability.
- A Special Forces component.
- Civilian component to include diplomatic representatives, civil affairs

personnel, civilian police, human rights personnel, etc.

Besides being necessary for out-of-area contingencies, 'air assault' capability is a significant force multiplier in conventional conflict. Despite what the peaceniks may say, substantial air assault capability is not only essential for furthering India's national interests, it is now inescapable for conventional deterrence. The present requirement is of at least one air assault brigade group with integral heli-lift capability for offensive employment on India's periphery. This capability must be in place by the end of the 12th Defence Plan period 2012-17. This brigade should be capable of short-notice deployment in India's extended neighbourhood by air and sea. Comprising three specially trained air assault battalions, integral firepower component and combat service support and logistics support units, the brigade group should be based on Chinook CH-47 and MI-17 transport helicopters. It should have the guaranteed firepower and support of two to three flights of attack and reconnaissance helicopters and one flight of UCAVs.

Military Intervention and Humanitarian Relief: Present Capabilities and Future Requirements

The air assault brigade group should be armed, equipped and trained to secure threatened islands, seize an air head and capture an important objective inside the adversary's territory such as a key bridge that is critical to furthering operations in depth. It should also be equipped and trained to operate as part of international coalition forces for speedy military interventions. To make it effective, it will have to be provided air and sealift capability and a high volume of battlefield air support by the *IAF* and the *IN* till its deployment area comes within reach of the artillery component of ground forces. Since the raising of such a potent brigade group is a highly expensive proposition, its components will need to be very carefully structured to get value for money.

Simultaneously, efforts should commence to raise a division-size rapid reaction force, of which the first air assault brigade group mentioned above should be a part, by the end of the 13th Defence Plan period 2017-22. The second brigade group of the Rapid Reaction Division (RRD) should have amphibious capability with the necessary transportation assets being acquired and held by the Indian Navy,

including landing and logistics ships. One brigade group in Southern Command has been recently designated as an amphibious brigade; this brigade group could be suitably upgraded. The amphibious brigade should be self-contained for 15 days of sustained intervention operations. The third brigade of the RRD should be lightly equipped for offensive and defensive employment in the plains and the mountains as well as jungle and desert terrain. All the brigade groups and their ancillary support elements should be capable of transportation by land, sea and air.

With the exception of the amphibious brigade, the division should be logistically self-contained for an initial deployment period of 15 to 20 days with limited daily replenishment. The infrastructure for such a division, especially strategic air lift, attack helicopters, heli-lift and landing ship capability, will entail heavy capital expenditure to establish and fairly large recurring costs to maintain. However, it is an inescapable requirement and funds will need to be found for such a force by innovative management of the defence budget and additional budgetary support. The second RRD

should be raised over the 14th and 15th Defence Plans by about 2032 when India's regional responsibilities would have grown considerably. Unless planning for the creation of such capabilities begins now, the formations will not be available when these are required to be employed.

Special Forces support should be available to the RRDs on as required basis, for conventional conflict and intervention operations. It needs to be appreciated by India's policy planners that in many situations when war has not yet commenced and it is not possible to employ ground forces overtly, Special Forces can be launched covertly to achieve important military objectives with inherent deniability. In Kandahar-type situations they provide the only viable military option. However, they can act with assurance only if they have been suitably structured and well trained for the multifarious tasks that they may be called upon to perform.

The only airborne force projection capability that India has at present is that of the independent Parachute Brigade. Since the organisational structure of this brigade is more

suitable for conventional operations, this brigade should be retained as an Army HQ reserve for strategic employment behind enemy lines to further the operations of ground forces that are expected to link up with it in an early time frame. However, when necessary, the brigade could be allotted to the RRD for short durations to carry out specific tasks.

While India has acquired limited strategic airlift and sea-lift capabilities, much more needs to be done. The Indian Navy acquired INS Jalashwa (ex-USS Trenton), a LPD that can carry one infantry battalion with full operational loads and is in the process of acquiring additional landing ships in addition to old ships in service. Besides long-range fighter-bomber aircraft with air-to-air refuelling capability like the SU-30MKI, the Indian Air Force has acquired fairly substantive strategic airlift capabilities, including six C-130 Super Hercules aircraft for the Special Forces and 10 C-1 Globemaster heavy-lift aircraft. In addition, CH-47 Chinook medium lift helicopters and additional transport aircraft are reported to be in the acquisition pipeline.

Military Intervention and Humanitarian Relief: Present Capabilities and Future Requirements

A permanent tri-Service headquarters equivalent to a Corps HQ should also be raised under HQ Integrated Defence Staff for training, assembling and commanding the task force when it is deployed to meet a contingency, for keeping watch over and following emerging situations, continuous threat assessment and operational planning. It should work in close coordination with the office of the National Security Advisor (NSA) and the National Crisis Management Cell. It should provide C4I2SR support to the RRDs and their firepower, combat service and logistics support components. The HQ should also be suitably staffed with a skeleton civilian component comprising diplomats, representatives from the intelligence agencies, civic affairs personnel and disaster relief staff on deputation. This component should be beefed up when the task force is ordered to be deployed. Unless planning for the creation of the capabilities that are necessary begins now, these potent fighting echelons will not be available when these are likely to be required.

Looking Ahead

It must be emphasised that rapid

reaction-cum-air assault capabilities will provide immense strategic reach and flexibility to the Cabinet Committee on Security and multiple options to the military planners in the prevailing era of strategic uncertainty. As government sanction may take some time to obtain, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) should establish the nucleus of such a force immediately by pooling the resources currently available with the three Services. The nominated echelons must train together at least once a year so that the armed forces can respond suitably to emerging threats.

It is also necessary to work with strategic partners and other friendly countries in India's extended neighbourhood and with organisations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and, when possible, even the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), to establish consultative mechanisms through diplomatic channels for the exchange of ideas, coordination of the utilisation of scarce resources and joint training and reconnaissance. As C Raja Mohan has averred in his book "Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the

Indo-Pacific”, the major powers in the region, including Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and the US, need to work creatively to frame acceptable rules for the commons in the Indo-Pacific. Unless such realisation comes about, subterranean tensions will continue to hamper stability. China has so far been ambivalent in seeking to join a cooperative framework and has preferred to stand apart. It has failed to realise that its growing trade and massive dependence on energy imports through the Indian Ocean make it imperative for it to join the efforts being made to establish such a framework.

Small-scale joint military exercises with likely coalition partners help to eliminate interoperability and command and control challenges. All of this can be achieved without having to enter into unnecessary alliances. Efforts put in during peace time always help to smoothen cooperative functioning during crisis situations when tempers are usually high, the media outcry for military responses is shrill and cool judgment is invariably at a premium.

As a regional power with aspirations for world power status and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, India is being increasingly called upon to become a net provider of security in the Southern Asian region and to join other friendly powers to maintain the security of the global commons as part of a cooperative security framework. As is well known, the US is ‘rebalancing’ or pivoting from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indo-Pacific as it is in this extended region encompassing two great oceans and the Asian and the Australian landmass that future challenges lie. While military alliances are almost completely passé in the 21st century, there is definitely a need to work together with strategic partners for peace and stability in India’s area of strategic interest. This extends from the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden in the west to the South China Sea in the East.

India cannot aspire to achieve great power status without simultaneously getting politically and militarily ready to bear the responsibilities that go with such a status. Military intervention in support of its national interests is one such responsibility and it cannot be

Military Intervention and Humanitarian Relief: Present Capabilities and Future Requirements

wished away. Unless India becomes the undisputed master of its own backyard in Southern Asia, including the Northern Indian Ocean region, it will not be recognised as a regional power. India's aspirations of becoming a power to reckon with on the world stage will never be achieved without potent capabilities for military

intervention. If the government sanctions the creation of the forces and organisational structures that will be required for future interventions, perhaps the cover story of Time magazine of April 1989 titled 'Super India – The Next Military Power' will soon begin to ring true.



About the Author

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