

Multiple Battlefronts

The government should not neglect the needs of the Indian Army

LT GEN. VINOD BHATIA (RETD)



THE 1.2-MILLION-strong Indian Army prepares to celebrate the 68th Army Day on 15 January 2016 with pride, parades, ceremonies and paying homage to the martyrs in cantonments across the

country. The celebrations also include a connect between the soldiers and the veterans, who flock the cantonments displaying their well won medals, miniature though, on their chests proud of the service they have rendered to the army and the nation. Reminiscing the many battles fought and their contributions in ensuring the security of the nation and its people, each story is narrated to motivate the serving soldiers to live and die for the 'nam namak and nishan' of their units, regiments and the country.

The Army Day celebrations this year too will be similar in content, but in es-

'Many changes have taken place but one change remains the same, that is your Task & Duty. You are required to ensure the security of this country against all odds'

Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

sence, there will be a major difference. Just a couple of kilometres from the Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate where the Army Commanders in their full military medals pay homage to the martyrs who have made the supreme sacrifice in the defence of the nation, the veterans would be sitting on a relay hunger strike at Jantar Mantar for the 215th day. Their demand, a simple grant of One Rank One Pension (OROP) as defined and accepted in principle on the floor of the Parliament. While the soldiers, both past



and present, are justifiably proud of the occasion and the great Indian Army and its traditions, but the veterans sitting on hunger strike, the first of its kind in the history of the nation, will definitely be a dampener to the celebrations. The bonding between the soldiers past and present is very robust and strong, based on unit, regimental, corps and family affiliations. More of this later.

The Indian Army needs to be recognised for the sterling service to the nation with 'Service before Self' being its motto. Army Day is also the occasion for the soldiers to rededicate themselves to the defence and service of the nation, and for the top brass to audit the performance and preparedness of the army, introspect and chart out the roadmap to meet present and future challenges as also to ensure the wellbeing of the soldiers.

Though some experts from the strategic community do feel that India has not



NATIONAL SHAME Ex-servicemen on protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar

fought a war for over four decades now and given the international environment, need for development and a nuclear overhang in the region, a war in the future is unlikely, and hence the diminishing relevance and status of the army. There may be some merit in this narrative, but the nation needs to remember that it is the preparation for war and the ability and capability of the military to defend national interests which provides the requisite security and deters war. On the other hand, it will not be incorrect to say that the Indian Army has been constantly and continuously at war, albeit fighting small wars in the sub-conventional domain.

The national aim is to 'transform India to a modern, prosperous and secure nation'. As security is a precursor to long term peace, stability and development,

securing India is a national imperative. The army is mandated to ensure a secure India. The primary role of the army is to ensure national security, territorial integrity and unity, defending the nation from external aggression and internal threats. India faces multiple and varied threats, a quick look at the security challenges is a must to comprehend the enormity of the tasks undertaken by the Indian Army.

China is a strong neighbour and the primary threat, whereas Pakistan is a troublesome neighbour and a constant threat and hence, there is an ever present danger of a conflict. India's land borders extend 15,106.7 km with seven nations including 106 km border with Afghanistan, touching 17 states and 92 districts. India also shares the longest disputed borders in the world, the

Sino-Indian border extends to 3,488 km, with China laying claim to over a 1,10,000 sqkm of Indian territory. The India-Pakistan Line of Control (LC) extends to 772.1 km and the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) along the Siachen glacier extends another 126.2 km. Pakistan also occupies 13,297 sqkm of Indian territory in Jammu and Kashmir and has been waging a proxy war for the last quarter of a century. India faces multiple and varied security threats and challenges across the full spectrum of conflict from small wars to collusive and hybrid wars to conventional and nuclear wars.

"India has to be prepared for a two-front war and build deterrence that ensures conflict is not an option for its adversaries," national security advisor Ajit Doval said at the Hindustan Times



NOT A MOMENT'S RESPITE At Line of Control in Uri, Kashmir

Leadership summit on 23 November 2014. "India has two neighbours, both nuclear powers (which) share a strategic relationship and a shared adversarial view of India." The armed forces and in particular the army has to be operationally ready and prepared for all contingencies. India's porous borders and lack of development in border areas are a major contributor to security concerns and challenges, making the army's role more difficult. The army has ensured an effective management and defence of the disputed borders, in one of the most inhospitable terrains in the world. It is to the credit of the Indian Army that it has maintained peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control with China, with the last shot in anger fired over four decades ago along the disputed borders, where the two Asian giants lack even a common understanding of the LAC, and transgressions by an assertive PLA are common. In addition to defending the nation against external threats and manning the disputed borders, the army also counters the internal security threats which emanate from across the borders with active support to terrorist and insurgent groups.

The Indian Army is by far the most battle-hardened and combat-rich army in the world. The army has successfully fought and comprehensively defeated the aggressive designs of Pakistan in

four wars, in 1947-1948, 1965, 1971 and 1999. In 1984, the army also thwarted Pakistan's move to occupy the strategically important Siachen Glacier by pre-empting and occupying critical passes all along the Salto ridge line. The heroic deeds of the soldiers in occupying, holding, defending and surviving at these altitudes itself is a separate saga of unparalleled bravery and courage.

Everything about the history of the Indian Army is not glorious. The army and the nation suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of China in 1962. Many reasons are assigned to the debacle of 1962, however, a quote from Time magazine of December 1962 sums up the fighting abilities and the never-say-die spirit of the Indian soldier, "The Indian Army needs almost everything except courage". The political and military leadership may have failed the soldier, but the soldiers have never ever failed the nation. There are also certain positive takeaways from the 1962 debacle. The political leadership realised the importance and relevance of the army in ensuring national security, and not to interfere in matters military which are best left to military professionals. But for the lessons learnt and corrective actions taken post-1962, the course of the 1965 conflict with Pakistan may have been different. India's victory in the 1965 war can be directly attributed to 1962 debacle.

The Indian Army has been engaged in internal security and counter-insurgency operations almost since Independence. The armed insurrections supported from across the borders in most of the Northeastern states have been successfully fought by the army and the Assam Rifles that is officered by the army. It is to the credit of the army that the nation has successfully resolved Mizoram and Nagaland insurgencies and the militancy in Punjab. The violence levels in Assam and Manipur are well under control. An effective counter-infiltration and counter terrorist grid by the army in Jammu and Kashmir has contributed in defeating Pakistan-sponsored proxy war, ensuring that the violence levels remain subcritical.

India stands solidly committed to assist the UN in the maintenance of international peace and security with a proud history of peacekeeping dating back to its inception in the Fifties. India has contributed nearly 180,000 troops, the largest number from any country, participated in more than 44 missions and 157 Indian peacekeepers have made the supreme sacrifice while serving in UN missions. India has also provided and continues to provide eminent force commanders for UN missions. In 2014, India was the second largest troop contributor with 8,123 personnel deployed with 12 UN peacekeeping missions. The



THE FIRST RESPONDERS Indian Army carrying out relief and rescue

requisitioned 122 times to quell law and order problems which spiralled out of control of civil authorities. In addition, the army has been requisitioned 146 times for a variety of reasons to protect public property and life. The army is not only the last resort but also the first responder, positive and prompt the soldier has always and every time voluntarily staked his life to ensure safety and security of his countrymen. Paying tributes to the army, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, “The level of toughness with which our armed forces deal with enemy nations is same as the level of compassion and kindness with which they save lives during natural calamities.”

It is not possible to detail or even list the many contributions of the army to nation-building. These are varied from sports to adventure, development of infrastructure and medical aid to people in the border areas, education to vocational training and above all being a proponent of the power of positive secularism. All these achievements have come at a great cost. In the 1947-48 war with Pakistan 1,500 all ranks laid down their lives with another 3,500 wounded. In the 1965 war, 2,902 all ranks were killed in action and 8,444 wounded and in 1971, 3,785 made the supreme sacrifice with 3,198 wounded. 527 all ranks laid down their lives in the Kargil war with 1,363 wounded. Since the beginning of the

high standards of performance maintained consistently by the Indian troop deployed on UN missions under challenging circumstances have won them high regard worldwide.

In addition to ensuring an effective defence and security of the nation, the army has many other contributions to nation building and the people. Recognised as ‘scrupulously apolitical’, the army’s major contribution post-Independence is in keeping the Indian nation and people united, despite externally aided insurgencies, religious fundamentalism and radicalisation, ethnic and caste-based riots and many other fissiparous tendencies.

The army since 1990 has been requisitioned 646 times in aid to civil authority. This includes 378 times for disaster re-

lief. The army’s rescue and relief operations were directly responsible for evacuating over 35,000 people during one of the deadliest floods in Uttarakhand in June 2013. The army also spearheaded the rescue operations in the recent flood affected areas of Chennai and earlier in Jammu and Kashmir, providing succour to the needy. The selfless work done by the army in Nepal during the April earthquake earned not only the goodwill of the Nepalese people but also international acclaim. The army on account of the pan-India footprint and deployment in remote areas prone to disasters is the first responder by default and given the training, discipline, commitment and the willing sacrifice of the soldiers is recognised as the saviour. The army is also a harbinger of peace having been



INSIDE THE FENCE On counter insurgency operations in Kashmir

Pakistan-sponsored proxy war in 1989, in Jammu and Kashmir alone, over 5,000 all ranks have been martyred in counter terrorist operations.

The Indian Army is well-known for the ethos, virtues and values of duty, honour, country, discipline, dedication, integrity, loyalty, courage, commitment, respect, sense of sacrifice, patriotism, selfless service, moral values and ethics. They have earned India's profound appreciation and reverence for their unwavering commitment to these values in war and peace, both at home and abroad.

According to Nitin Gokhale: "Historically, it is to the credit of the Indian armed forces that they have fulfilled their assigned role as an organ of the state, that they have functioned effectively in every role, despite a general lack of a supportive government environment by way of adequate finances, resources, equipment, personnel policies, or higher political direction. Yet, though the average Indian soldier remains as hardy as before, he is certainly confused with the pace of change occurring all around him."

The observation is apt and the government and the army need to take the changing environment seriously. The veterans unhappy with the sanction of a delayed and diluted OROP continue to demand justice. The services are also unhappy with the recommendations of the 7th Central Pay Commission (CPC), wherein the pay and status equivalence of all ranks has taken a beating yet again.

A soldier serving at Siachen will get a maximum of Rs 31,000 as hazard and risk allowance, commonly known as Siachen allowance, which will be approximately 40 per cent less than his civil counterpart serving a 'Difficult Tenure' say in Guwahati or Srinagar who will be entitled to Rs 54,000.

The status equivalence and comparison with Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) is faulty and will adversely impact the moral of the armed forces. The 6th CPC anomalies have neither been considered nor corrected and the 7th CPC recommendations further dilute the emoluments and izzat of the armed forces. If not corrected, it is likely to degrade the effectiveness of the army, something the nation cannot afford. After a decade long of 'marking time' and status quo, much is expected from the Modi-led NDA government. The defence minister Manohar Parrikar has demonstrated an unprecedented resolve and urgency to ensure time bound modernisation, clearing Rs 90,000 crore worth of procurements of much needed arms and equipment. This impetus will ensure organisation effectiveness and enhance the nation's military might. The two issues troubling the serving officers and veterans are OROP and the recommendations of 7th CPC, as these impact the human resource and the soldiers who are committed to national security and serving the nation, it is an imperative that they are addressed promptly and positively.

It is essential to understand why the soldier is pivotal for the security and well-being of a nation-state. Chanakya, the great Indian philosopher and thinker, warned his king, "The day the soldier has to demand his dues will be a sad day for Magadha, for then, on that day, you will have lost all moral sanction to be King!" Chanakya discreetly but firmly reminded the king that his safety and security as well as that of his empire depended on the trust and sacrifice of his soldiers. The erosion and degradation of the self-respect and self-esteem of the soldiers is detrimental to the effectiveness and efficacy of the army and national security. The government and the army should ensure that the justified aspirations of all ranks are addressed.

The army takes pride in their calling and engage themselves wholeheartedly in the pursuit of professional excellence so that they can serve the nation with honour. Apolitical with a secular ethos, professional and committed, the Indian Army is without doubt a strong and unyielding bastion for national unity and integrity. In the present day security environment within the country and the region, the army will continue to play a critical role in nation security. The powers that be need to ensure that this great national institution, the Indian army, is effective and well cared for. ||

(The writer is former director general military operations and DG Infantry)