

# Medals and Ribbons

Jan. - Mar. 2026 | Vol.6 | Issue 1 ■ Price Rs.200/- ■ Annual Subscription Rs.700/- (ENGLISH QUARTERLY)

A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS

## INDIA AND THE FRACTURED GLOBAL ORDER

*Indistinct Contours of a New Order*

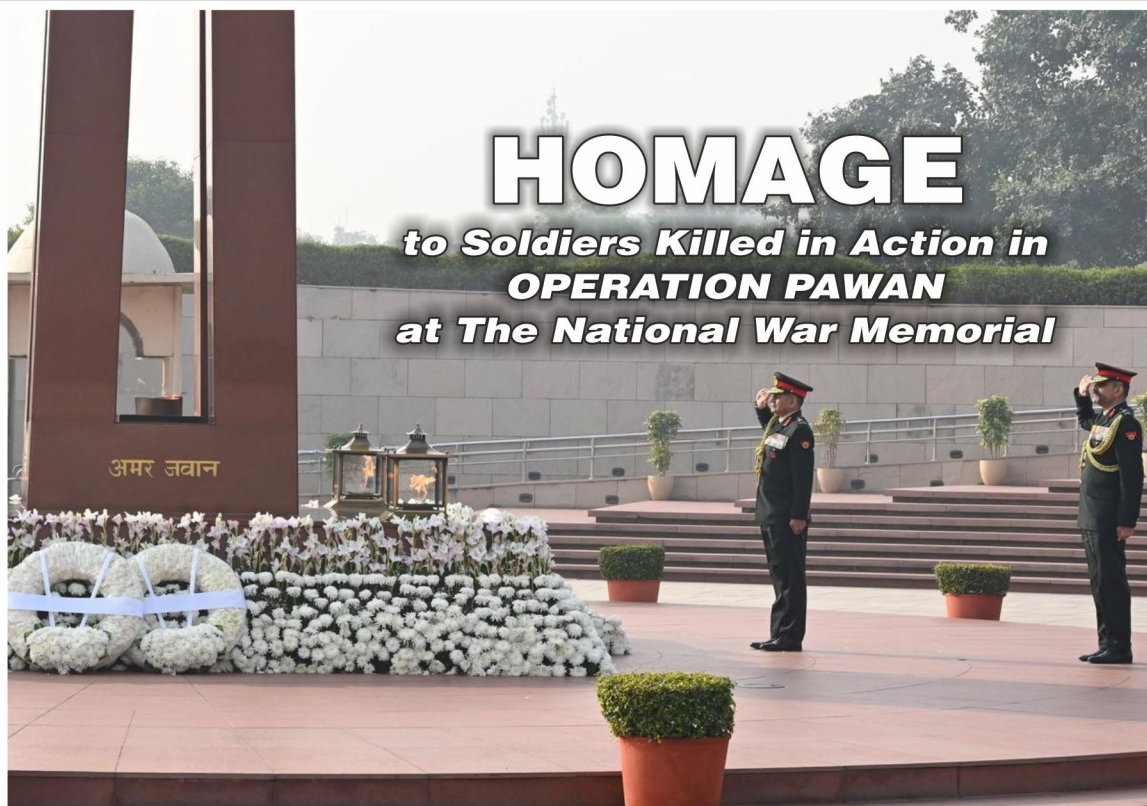
**India - China Detente**  
*Gradual Steps Towards a Reset*

**Rise of the PLA Air Force**  
*Shaping China's National Security Strategy*

**Pakistan's Middle Eastern  
Dilemma**

*Post - Strategic Mutual Defence  
Agreement with Saudi Arabia*





# HOMAGE

*to Soldiers Killed in Action in  
OPERATION PAWAN  
at The National War Memorial*

**T**he Indian Army held its first major official homage for the soldiers killed in action while serving with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Operation Pawan at the National War Memorial (NWM) in New Delhi on November 25, 2025. General Upendra Dwivedi, Chief of Army Staff laid wreaths to honour the 1171 fallen soldiers, a significant step to formally recognize the sacrifices from the 1987-1990 Sri Lanka Mission. General Upendra Dwivedi, Chief of Army Staff and Lieutenant General Pushpendra Singh, Vice Chief of Army Staff paid respects, joined by veterans and family members like Mrs. Uma Parameswaran, wife of Major Ramaswamy Parameswaran, PVC (Posthumous), and Major General Ashok K. Mehta (Retd). The event signified a new chapter in recognizing the bravery and sacrifices of the IPKF, finally bringing their service into the formal national memory at the NWM.





## Col David Devasahayam



In 2025, we have been witness to many subtle and blatant pressures being applied, primarily by the USA, to weaken the strategic autonomy stance of the Indian Government. Tariffs have been the weapon of choice of the Trump administration. Undoubtedly, the Indian economy has faced headwinds due to the drop in exports to the USA.

It is in the background of this that I reached out to Dr Shashi Tharoor to write about India and the global scenario in the Reflections column of this issue. Dr Tharoor has been associated with the Radiant Group and particularly with the Radiant Wellness Conclave for several years. We have regularly exchanged views and opinions on diverse topics. His expertise and intellect is renowned. I have enjoyed reading his assessment of the global power dynamics, and the way to navigate through superpower pressures, while maintaining an even keel as far as our national interests are concerned. We are privileged to host his opinion piece as 'Reflections' in this issue.

As pointed out by Dr Tharoor, the US President has recently enunciated a "G2" term, after his meeting with the Chinese President at Busan in South Korea, indicative of the new geopolitical reality. Military

leaders must remain abreast of the global power play, the conflicts, the different domains of covert and overt confrontations to be comprehensively prepared for future warfighting. Medals and Ribbons hence highlights contemporary security risks and analyses conflicts and events affecting our national security. We have therefore examined the chances of improvement in relations between India and China, assessed Pakistan's Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia signed in September 2025, looked at the violent protests that have rocked Nepal and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, besides many other topical issues.

Global power has always been with the nations possessing the best technology. Technological superiority enabled the Western powers to colonise vast swathes in Asia and Africa. Technology is proving to be the 'Game Changer' in modern wars too, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) will soon have far reaching impact on destructive power unleashed by weapons. AI tools require quality data to achieve best results. Thus, many nations are discussing the necessity to achieve data sovereignty and the digital terrain is becoming a part and parcel of future conflicts. A little known battlefield paradigm, we have drawn your attention to this sphere in this issue.

Recently, in an attempt to remain in touch with the ground, I had the occasion to interact with a Divisional Commander and the Colonel of our Regiment ( 8 Gorkha Rifles ) Major General Kartik Seshadri, VSM and stood educated to hear about the sweeping technological changes which are happening today compared to how it was when I was serving in the Army two decades ago.

The editorial team has woven together a series of fine articles and perspectives with diverse stories of different hues giving a good insight into life in the Armed Forces and the security dimensions facing our nation presently. I am sure the readers will salute the Armed Forces for their courage and professionalism. Medals and Ribbons has gained greater readership, with increasing hits on our website too; and a good feedback from the defence community at large. I am sanguine that readers will give this issue a 'thumbs up' too.



*With Major General Kartik Seshadri, VSM, Colonel of 8 Gorkha Rifles in his office.*



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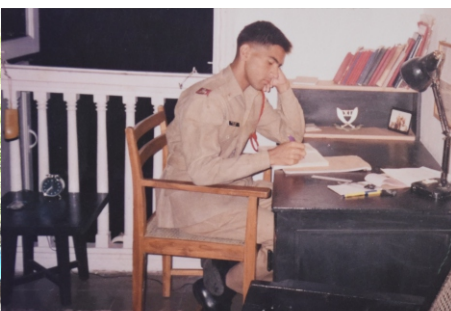
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## Medals and Ribbons

A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS (ENGLISH QUARTERLY)

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Lt Gen J S Sandhu, (Retd).

When I look back in time, I perceive 2025 as a **Year of Disruption** – characterised by the Disruptive Leadership style of President Donald Trump, in the first year of his second term. The US President has displayed a transactional nature in all his dealings, which has upended stable international relations. Allies have been disparaged and pressured to concede to American interests. The domestic scene in USA was also disrupted with crackdowns on Universities and international students, existing visa rules were changed, besides a host of other measures.

In international relations, we learnt about three different schools of thought – The **Realist Theory, the Liberalism Theory and the Constructive Theory**. The **Realist Theory** posits that the international system is anarchic (lacks a central authority), forcing states to prioritize their own survival and security above all else. National interest is defined in terms of power (military and economic), and cooperation is merely a tool for achieving self-serving goals. In contrast, **liberalism** argues that cooperation is possible and often beneficial for mutual gain (absolute gains). This theory emphasizes the role of international institutions (like the UN), economic interdependence (trade), and shared values (democracy, human rights) in shaping state behaviour. Nations might cooperate to address common challenges like climate change or pandemics, thus balancing national interest with a broader "*global responsibility*". The **Constructive approach** challenges the fixed idea of national interest entirely.

Constructivists argue that state preferences are not static or predetermined but are socially constructed through interactions, shared ideas, norms and identities. What a nation defines as its "*interest*" can change over time based on its perception of itself and its role in the world.

In reality, foreign policy usually involves a complex blend of these aspects. While the pursuit of national security and economic prosperity is paramount for any government, nations often balance these vital interests with the need for international cooperation to maintain a stable, functioning global system. Why do we need to understand these international dynamics? In the DIME-T (Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic and Technology) acronym representing instruments of national power, diplomacy and foreign relations plays a vital role. It can expand friction between nations leading to conflict, or it may assuage differences and negotiate to achieve peace.

### What do the disruptions of 2025 portend for India?

For India, it implies greater challenges on the Strategic Autonomy path - navigating through the tariff barriers, trade deficits and diversified energy security; maintaining contacts, allies and strategic partnerships; while ensuring our economic growth and national security. A tall order indeed, but our statecraft has the benefit of civilizational patience. We wait and watch, weather out the storm, navigate through the perils and still reach the peak!

In this issue, we have hence devoted substantial space to look at the Global and Regional environment. As highlighted by Colonel David Devasahayam in the Founder's Note, Dr. Shashi Tharoor gives us a macro view of the '**Fractured Global Order**'. Our eminent China expert, Lieutenant General S L Narasimhan deliberates on the India – China handshake, post the Tianjin meeting between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi. Air Marshal D Choudhury gives us an excellent overview of the rise of the PLA Air Force, which is shaping China's National Security Strategy.



Major General H Dharmarajan examines the September 25 Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia which has security connotations for us.

**Why have the Saudis entered into the SMDA?** Broadly speaking, the Saudi military has modern equipment but their '*boots on ground capability*' is weak. A few years ago, Saudi Arabia had wanted Pakistani troops to join their campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, but Pakistan's Parliament declined to do so. The SMDA will bind Pakistan to commit resources in future, when required by the Saudi Kingdom. Inter alia, Saudi military power is enhanced for their Middle East endeavours - but may become a dilemma for Pakistan.

Regime change through violent protests has been witnessed in our neighbourhood in the last few years. "*Engineering digital rage*" is a key aspect of contemporary protest movements, it uses social media algorithms to amplify negative emotions and rapidly mobilize support across vast networks. The process leverages the emotional power of user-generated content to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. The Gen Z protests in Bangladesh and Nepal gained traction through the social media. I have discussed these aspects and related the role of the Army in such violent protests.

As mentioned in the Founder's Note too, technology is a major factor in a nation's security apparatus. Our Associate Editor Major General Ravi Murugan has analysed the impact of technology on deterrence, and in another article we have highlighted the importance of data sovereignty in the emerging digital battlefield. Rapport and synergy between the political and military leadership is another factor which leads to victory in battle, epitomised by the comfortable equation between Indira Gandhi and Manekshaw in the 1971 War. We have covered another such example of politico-military cohesion in the article '*Roosevelt and his Fleet Commanders*' by Mr. Trent Hone, a US naval historian of repute.

Amongst other articles, we have included a report on Left Wing Extremism in Central India which is being decimated rapidly. Recognising the grit, commitment and resilience of our men and women in uniform, we have looked at **Operation Dharali** (the disaster relief operation in Uttarakhand in August 2025), and the 1993 Sappers Expedition to Nanda Devi, which brings out the extreme difficulties in mountaineering. We also pay tribute to Lieutenant P N Datt, AC (Posthumous) and salute the perseverance of Naib Subedar Jaismine Lamboria (our champion pugilist). The story of Wing Commander Gita Chanda, our first woman paratrooper is also interesting. Besides our Money Matters Column, a few anecdotal accounts have been included in this issue and make for interesting reading. In our regular Wellness column, Dr. Renuka David emphasises the wellness benefits of taking a break from regular routine.

**We will continue to focus on contemporary issues and current events in our issues, while also including articles on adventure activities, valiant heroes, sports personalities, anecdotes and operational activities of the Armed Forces.**

Desirous authors may please send the articles to [chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com](mailto:chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com) by 10 February 2026. We look forward to your earnest feedback. The Editorial Team thanks all the readers for your valuable support and your positive kudos to this publication.





# INDIA - CHINA DÉTENTE

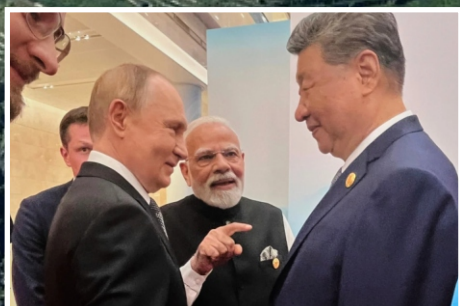
## Gradual Steps Towards a Reset Despite Divergent Interests

Many Western analysts have opined that President Donald Trump's tariff penalties on India have pushed India closer to China. The Tianjin meeting between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi is also indicative of a reset in relations. An analysis of the various factors at play by an eminent China expert.

### The Background

The ongoing India China détente is the third since both the countries became Republics. The first one was after the visit of the Late Prime Minister of India, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, to China in 1988. The **"Long Handshake"** between him and Late Paramount Leader of China Mr Deng Xiaoping reset the ties between India and China after the post-1962 India-China War hiatus in the bilateral relationship. The consequent improved ties continued for the longest period in the history of post-1949 bilateral relations between India and China. The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China Border Areas of 1993, Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field Along the LAC in the India-China Border Areas of 1996, Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question of 2005 and the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation of 2013 all stand testimony to that.

The second reset was when Mr Xi Jinping and Mr Modi came to power. The picture of both of them sitting on a swing in Ahmedabad went viral. This bonhomie continued till the two informal summits, first in Wuhan in 2018 and the second in Mahabalipuram in 2019. In these first two détente, substantial measures were agreed upon to improve the bilateral relationship. Mr Modi's visit to China in 2015 was very significant where a number of agreements were signed. If only that momentum had been sustained, the India China relationship would have been the cynosure of all countries in



*The Great Bend on the Yarlung Tsangpo river.  
(Photo China News Service/ Getty Images)*

*Inset. The bonhomie among PM Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin & Chinese President Xi Jinping at the SCO summit  
(Photo: PTI)*





*The India-China border at the Bumla Pass (Biju Boro/AFP/Getty Images)*

the world. That it did not, is a sad testimony to how fragile international relations are.

#### **The present détente is the third one.**

The present state of relations between India and China are due to two seminal incidents that took place. The first one was the Dolam Incident in 2017 when Indian troops went into Bhutanese territory to stop the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from constructing the road in the Dolam Plateau. There was an understanding between India and China that any changes in the Tri-junction area along the boundary between India and China will be with the concurrence of all three nations involved. China's action was in violation of that principle. The second was the Galwan Incident in 2020. Chinese forces that had concentrated opposite Eastern Ladakh as had been the practice in the few preceding years, suddenly turned and made an effort to unilaterally change the status quo along the LAC in the area of Galwan Valley. This resulted in fatal casualties to both India and China after a gap of 45 years. After a four-year pause in bilateral relations, things are somewhat looking up. We need to understand the

Cooperation meetings and High-Level Military Commanders' Meetings took place alternatively.

The first step of the three-step process namely, disengagement, de-escalation and de-induction, was completed after four years of such negotiations just before Mr Xi Jinping, President of China, and Mr Modi met in Kazan on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in October 2024. Disengagement means that the troops facing each other in close proximity pull back a bit so that chances of escalation of any tensions are reduced. De-escalation means that after disengagement, troops from both sides pull back further to the depth areas. De-induction means that all forces that were inducted into the area go back to positions that they were occupying before April 2020. At present, talks on de-escalation are yet to commence. Since disengagement had taken place, and after the Kazan meeting of October 2024, there was rekindled hope that the relations between India and China will improve considerably. The recently concluded Tianjin Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on the sidelines of which Mr Modi and Mr Xi met added to that expectation.

Another factor which has influenced the détente is US actions. During the first Trump Presidency, a competitive relationship emerged between USA and China. The Biden Presidency adopted a similar approach. However, the second Trump Presidency threw a surprise at everybody. Tariffs became the principal instrument of American foreign policy. Competing with each other, USA and China kept increasing the tariffs on each other's goods to 145% and 125% respectively. However, the sustenance of such high tariffs was not practical, and they both brought down the tariffs. USA brought down the tariffs on China to

reasons for the current détente and analyse its strength.

#### **The Path to the Present Détente**

China and the PLA did not take kindly to the action that the Indian Army took to stop the road construction in Dolam Plateau. Tension in the bilateral relations started brewing in right earnest since then. It is really a surprise and a toast to the resilience in the bilateral relationship that the two informal summits of 2018 and 2019 still took place thereafter. However, the Galwan Incident put paid to that reconciliatory path. For four years India and China engaged in talks to get back to status quo ante. During that effort, the Working Mechanism for Coordination and



30%. After the meeting between Mr Trump and Mr Xi Jinping on 30 October 2025, Mr Trump reduced the 10% tariff he had imposed on China for its failure to control the export of Fentanyl, a narcotic substance, to USA. In the hope of securing a trade agreement, Mr Trump has softened his approach towards China. Possibly this change in US attitude can be attributed to China's stranglehold on processed Rare Earth elements that are needed not only by USA but also by the entire world.

Tariffs also played an important role in India – USA relations. Apprehending that Trump's second term may be different from the first one, India started engagement with the present US administration rather early. However, things did not proceed smoothly as the trade negotiations continued. Another factor that led to the downslide in USA - India relations was the feeling that India's import of Russian oil is enabling Russia to prolong the Russia - Ukraine War. That Europe and USA imported critical items from Russia that they needed to keep their economy and technological pursuit going, was conveniently overlooked. Consequently, India was slapped with a tariff of 50%. The differentiated relationships between USA – China and USA – India is clearly discernible.

There is also a perception that USA was trying to play on the chasm between India and China. All this led to the famous handshake between the Indian and Chinese leaders. The picture of Mr Modi, Mr Xi Jinping and Mr Putin talking amiably in Tianjin during the SCO Summit caught the attention of the world and in particular the USA. Mr Trump tweeted, *"We've Lost India, Russia to Deepest, Darkest China"*. Mr Putin taking Mr Modi in his vehicle for a long tete-a-tete was also noticed. Despite the turbulence in the India - USA relationship, negotiations for the Bilateral Trade Agreement continued. As of early

December 25, it is felt that the framework for the Agreement is close to conclusion. The reason for describing USA's relations with India and China is that it is one of the causes for the present détente.

The Russia - China relationship is another important aspect that one needs to consider. Ever since the Russia-Ukraine war started in February 2022, Russia's dependence on China has increased in terms of diplomacy, oil exports and increased trade. Consequently, China has emerged as a stronger partner in that bilateral relationship. This has further increased China's enhanced confidence that it has arrived on the international arena. India is reducing its oil import from Russia not only due to pressure from the USA, but also since the price of Russian crude oil has slowly started creeping up. Russia's constant good relation with India has been another reason for improved India – China relations. It is in this milieu that one needs to see the current India - China détente.

### Effects of the Détente

**What all has happened due to this détente?** Direct flights between India and China that had been suspended since 2020 have resumed. The Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, which was also suspended from 2020 has restarted. There has been a consensus on increasing the number of pilgrims next year. Both countries have agreed to restart the border trade that was happening at Shipki La, Lipulekh and Nathula next summer. Because of the difficult terrain and high altitude, border trade takes place between India and China from May to November of every year. By the time the agreement was reached it was too late to start the trade this year. China and India have had agreements on river data sharing during the monsoon season for two rivers, i.e., Sutlej and Brahmaputra. The agreement for Sutlej expired in 2020 and the one for Brahmaputra in 2023. Both have yet to be renewed. China has agreed that it will share the river water data on humanitarian grounds.



Pilgrims with Mount Kailash in the background (Photo <https://www.himalayanjoy.com/kailash-mansarovar-yatra>)



*Chinese President Xi Jinping with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Arjuna's Penance in Mamallapuram in October 2019 (ANI)*

There is contradictory information coming on the dam China is planning to construct on Brahmaputra River near the Great Bend. Some sources say that it is a 'run of the river' dam. In that case, there will be no or minimal impact on the flow of water in Brahmaputra. India's demand that China share information on this dam has been met with silence. There has been some improvement on the issue of visas for Chinese citizens for tourism. On the issue of allowing journalists to be posted in each other's country, there has been concurrence. The talks between Special Representatives have recommenced. An Expert Group is to be nominated for working on an early harvest solution for some areas of the India - China boundary. A Working Group for better management of the LAC is to be nominated. China has agreed to release the Tunnel Boring Machines (TBMs) to India that it had been holding up for more than a year. The point to note here is that India placed the order for TBMs on a German company that produced them in its facility in China. It has also agreed to release fertilisers and

that the PN3 provisions should be relaxed. Reportedly, a cabinet note to relax the provisions of PN3 has been prepared and has been circulated for comments. While it is not an embargo on Chinese investment, a due process of vetting of applications for investment by Chinese companies is being followed. Visas for Chinese citizens have not been opened up completely. The boundary question has not seen any progress. There has not been much improvement in people-to-people contacts.

### Prognosis for this Détente

**Where do we go from here?** The basic conditions that mar the bilateral relationship between India and China have not changed. The LAC, though stable, is capable of becoming an irritant in bilateral relations at any time. The bilateral trade that is skewed in favour of China is not showing any signs of altering. Though there has been a demand for letting investments from China into India, the basic conditions due to which the PN 3 was issued in April 2020 have not changed. In the earlier investments that were allowed in India from China, the benefits that accrued to India have been minimal. China's opposition to proscribing the terrorists who are residing in Pakistan has not changed. China has also not signed on to the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism and International Solar Alliance proposed by India. China's cooperation with India in international institutions has been less than optimal. China's assistance to Pakistan during **Operation Sindoor** has not gone down well in India. Under these conditions it is extremely difficult for the bilateral relationship to improve considerably. However, all is not lost.

**There are four caveats for the détente to last** and also further



improve the bilateral relations between India and China. **First**, there has to be a commitment to maintain peace and tranquillity along the LAC. **Two**, three mutuals i.e., mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest should be adhered to. The reason for the three mutuals is that there has been a feeling in India that China has not been respecting India's position on its sovereignty. A case in point is that China did not respect India's concerns and kept saying that the boundary question has been stabilised and India should move on and improve the bilateral relations on all other fronts. Also, China did not respect the agreements that have been signed between both the countries with regard to the boundary question. Mutual sensitivity is to highlight the fact that China Pakistan Economic Corridor violates India's sovereignty and China has been insensitive to India's concerns about it. Mutual interest is in maintaining peace and tranquillity along the LAC and also in cooperating on issues of mutual concern like climate change. The **third** caveat is the principle of equal and mutual security. Rooted in Panchsheel, it means that the security of India and China are interdependent and both must be considered equally for a lasting solution. **Fourth** and the last is the need for a level playing field. Indian companies do not get equal access for entry into China. There are other non-tariff barriers like excessive phytosanitary requirements for Indian agriculture products that need to be taken care of.

Hence it is unlikely that the bilateral relations between India and China will improve drastically. But, if China has intentions of improving the bilateral relations and pays attention to India's concerns, the relationship could possibly improve. Since both countries are competing for the same strategic space,



Chinese (foreground) and Indian soldiers (R, background) clash near Galwan River June 2020 (Photo getty images)

competition between them is likely to stay. However much this relationship improves, there will always be impediments that may pull this backwards. Therefore, considerable improvement in the bilateral

relationship that exists in the present scenario is unlikely.

**In sum, one can safely assume that the present détente is likely to hold but it may not improve the bilateral relations considerably.**



*Lieutenant General S L Narasimhan, PVSM, AVSM\*, VSM was commissioned into the Madras Regiment in 1977. He served as the Defence Attaché in the Embassy of India in China for three years and has worked extensively on the India-China border, including commanding a Corps in North East India. He was the Commandant, Army War College, Mhow prior to his superannuation in May 2016. His expertise on China spans its international relations, internal issues, economy, defence and science & technology developments in China. Lieutenant General Narasimhan is a former Member of the National Security Advisory Board. He was the first Director General of the Centre for Contemporary China Studies, a policy-oriented inter-ministerial think tank of the Government of India for five years. He is presently Adjunct Distinguished Fellow with Gateway House, Mumbai, Distinguished Fellow with the Centre for Air Power Studies, India and Emeritus Resource Faculty with Rashtriya Raksha University, India. He has graduated in Mathematics, is a post-graduate in Defence Studies and has a PhD in India-China Relations.*



**Lieutenant General  
S L Narasimhan**

# PAKISTAN'S MIDDLE EASTERN DILEMMA

Is our Western Neighbour walking into a Thucydidean Trap?

It is not easy to be in Pakistan, with a crisis of identity – be it ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or its ever-deepening sectarian divides. This is further exacerbated not just by political fragmentation (with increasing strife within for autonomy), but even in a broader context of its own geo-political identity. Amidst all this, when a strategic defence agreement with Saudi Arabia (KSA) is announced,<sup>1</sup> one ponders over how our Western neighbour has arrived at such a crossroads. For the record, Pakistan's PM Shehbaz Sharif declared the upgrading of their bilateral security relationship with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (MbS) at Riyadh on 17 September 2025. Yet Pakistan's own vibrant media has questioned if it was really a "moment in the sun" for its diplomatic corps.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, when hostilities erupted along the Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan a few weeks later in October 2025, the Saudis did not intervene in any tangible way to support Pakistan as per the terms of the Agreement. Before delving deeper, an overview of the geo-political land masses that juxtapose in the region of Pakistan would be in order – be it the South Asian complex, the West Asian orientation, the abutment with Central Asia, or the connect to China through the illegally occupied territory of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK).

## Juggling Pakistan's Geographic Identities

Starting at Partition with its legacy of being a home for *South Asian Muslims*<sup>3</sup>, Pakistan has often dabbled with being a

<sup>1</sup> "Saudi Press Agency Report "Joint Statement Issued Following Pakistan Prime Minister State Visit to Saudi Arabia" 17 September 2025 <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/w2399706>

<sup>2</sup> "Pakistani Diplomacy's Moment in the Sun?" 04 October 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1946541/pakistani-diplomacy-moment-in-the-sun>

<sup>3</sup> The Indian Muslim population is the third largest, after that of Indonesia and Pakistan.



Top. Emblem of Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (credit. [en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org))

Bottom Right. General Rabeel Sharif, former Pakistan Army Chief (third from left) with a high level delegation from Azerbaijan at the IMCTC office in Saudi Arabia (credit. [mod.gov.az](https://mod.gov.az))



part of West Asia as a leader for the Islamic Nations<sup>4</sup>, and at times *Turkification* of its religious fabric<sup>5</sup> for the support that it got in international forums. As regards its earlier perceived strategic depth in *Afghanistan* and as a backyard gateway towards *Central Asia*<sup>6</sup>, the scenario has been upended recently – turning into a spectacular failure.<sup>7</sup> After the launch of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through the Karakoram in 2013, its dependence on China grew into an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership.

Interestingly, Pakistan's recent tightrope walk towards US President Trump's overtures by Field Marshal Asif Munir has been remarked by China as "short-term geo-political noise."<sup>8</sup>

However, with the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has brought its *Middle Eastern* identity back to centre stage. Prior to getting into the security ramifications of this development, a peek into the history of this long-enduring relationship would be appropriate.

### Record of Rawalpindi-Riyadh Relations

Pakistani bonhomie with the Arab Kingdom dates back to the pre-

Independence era. The Saudi royalty initially reached out to the Muslim League after the 1940 Lahore Declaration, demonstrating support for a separate Muslim homeland way before Partition.<sup>9</sup> Saudi financial assistance too followed during the 1943 Bengal Famine responding to Jinnah's call, akin to an assurance for critical moments to follow for a future Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> *A Treaty of Friendship* for bilateral cooperation followed in 1951.

However, the signing of the Baghdad Pact in September 1955 by Pakistan led to fraying of its Saudi ties, since this was seen as antagonistic to the Arab world.<sup>11</sup> Saudi Arabia moved closer to India for a while thereafter, with exchange of visits by the leaders expressing support for a larger role for India in the global arena.<sup>12</sup> Military and strategic cooperation with the KSA got a fillip again only after Pakistan President Ayub Khan's visit in 1960, highlighted the convergence of interests. With the Yemen Civil War breaking out in 1962, and Egypt supporting the Republican forces, the Saudi Arabian military found itself wanting in supporting the royalists. The Saudis sought support from

Pakistan at that stage, and the deployment of Pakistani military personnel began during the Yemen conflict. Construction of fortifications along the Saudi-Yemen border was also reportedly undertaken by the Pakistan Army Engineers.

During the 1965 Indo-Pak War, the KSA actively supported Pakistan both on the diplomatic front and in offering material support. This later got upgraded to a formal defence agreement in 1967 for Pakistan to train the Royal Armed Forces of the Kingdom, following which expansive support has been provided by Pakistan to the KSA.<sup>13</sup> RSAF fighter jets were operated by Pakistani pilots against Yemen in the Al-Wadiah conflict in 1969. After the joint hosting of the Lahore Islamic Summit along with Saudi Arabia in 1974, Pakistan further facilitated the KSA authorities in playing a pivotal role in the resolution of the Grand Mosque seizure in 1979.<sup>14</sup>

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, this relationship was upgraded to a formal defence cooperation pact with the deployment

4 "Our identity crisis – Pakistan" 01 Aug 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572266> highlights the deliberate effort at state-sponsored Arabization in Pakistan, away from its South Asian cultural heritage.

5 Naqvi, Fraz "From Arabization to Turkification: The Identity Crisis of Pakistan" <https://modern.diplomacy.eu/2020/05/19/from-arabization-to-turkification-the-identity-crisis-of-pakistan/> 19 May 2020.

6 Jaffer, Manabil "Pakistan's Vision Towards Central Asia" <https://www.eurasiareview.com/01102024-pakistans-vision-towards-central-asia-oped/> 01 Oct 2024.

7 "Intense Clashes erupt Along Pakistan-Afghanistan Border" <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/intense-clashes-erupt-along-pakistan-afghanistan-border/> 12 Oct 2025.

8 "China Downplays Trump-Munir Ties, Says Pakistan Won't Ditch Beijing Neighbours", Deccan Chronicle 06 Aug 2025 <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/world/neighbours/china-downplays-trump-munir-ties-says-pakistan-wont-ditch-beijing-1895846>

9 "Diplomatic relations between Pakistan – Saudi Arabia" <https://pakistaninksa.com/our-relationship/> The Crown Prince Saud bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud then had visited Pakistan with his five brothers, two of whom - Prince Faisal and Prince Fahd - were to later become the kings of Saudi Arabia.

10 Asseri, Ali Awad. "Echoes of history in Saudi solidarity with Pakistan" Arab News, 28 Mar 2024 <https://arab.news/c839e>

11 Burke, S.M. "Pakistan's Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis" Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.204

12 Quamar, Md. Muddassir, "Indo-Saudi Relations Emerging Strategic Dimensions", King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, Dirasat, Jumada I, 1439 - Feb 2018, ISBN: 978-603-8206-62-1, p.9. <https://kfcris.com/pdf/db35f7a780f8de86b8064ae43c0b77ed5abb4dc368a49.pdf>

13 Akeram, Sarab "Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Defence Cooperation: Enhancing Relations Further" Issue Brief, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 11 Sep 2023, ISSI 2023 [https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/IB\\_Sarab\\_Sept\\_11\\_2023.pdf](https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/IB_Sarab_Sept_11_2023.pdf)

14 Naureen, A., Kauravi, W.K., "The deep-rooted ties with Saudi Arabia" The Express Tribune, 17 Jan 2023, The deployment of Pakistan's SSG commandos enabled ending the siege in 1979. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2396198/the-deep-rooted-ties-with-saudi-arabia>



*Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif meets Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in Makkah, 07 June 2025 (photo APP)*

of 15000 Pakistani troops at the behest of Riyadh in 1982. Both countries jointly supported the Afghan Mujahideen against the Russians in the 1980s. The cooperation during the First Gulf War witnessed up to 13000 Pakistani military personnel actively participating in Saudi Arabia to protect the holy sites of Islam. But this was not before the Pakistan Army Chief General Mirza Aslam Beg openly voiced support for Saddam Hussein<sup>15</sup> stating that the Gulf War was a part of a "Zionist" strategy, putting the KSA in an embarrassing position. However, with continuing cooperation in military training and exercises, deployment of Pakistan Armed Forces trainers has been maintained throughout.

Post the 1998 nuclear test explosions, Saudi Arabia came forward to assist Pakistan in dealing with the sanctions that followed.<sup>16</sup> With the increasing influx of Saudi investment and loans, Saudi Arabia correspondingly grew as one of the largest importers of Pakistani weaponry. Be it army training exercises, maritime coordination by the navies, or joint missile firing with the air forces – the training deployments of Pakistan military in the KSA continued over time, with commitments being non-belligerent in nature. Considerable cooperation on the counter-terrorism front developed.

The relationship again faced a setback in 2015 when Pakistan's Parliament voted against sending

troops to join the Saudi-led military action against the Houthi rebels.<sup>17</sup> Pakistan's reluctance to get involved in the Yemeni civil war strained Pakistan-Saudi ties, but soon the Pakistan Ordnance Factories secured a \$81 million export order from Saudi Arabia in 2016.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently in 2017, the newly formed Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) appointed Pakistan's former army chief, General Raheel Sharif to lead the force. This 43-nation strong pan-Islamic military alliance, focused on counter-terrorism coordination, continues to expand even today.

With the SMDA inked in September 2025, their military cooperation has been formally elevated to a new level.

The agreement states that "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both". A slew of economic benefits appeared to follow for Pakistan in various ways from the KSA,<sup>19</sup> be it extending a billion-dollar oil financing facility, rolling over billions of dollars in deposits with Pakistani banks, a new Economic Framework to promote Joint Ventures within public and private sectors in energy, industry, mining and Information Technology sectors and more.<sup>20</sup>

### The Prompt for Public Diplomacy

While the history of this enduring Pakistan-KSA friendship chronicles many trials and tribulations over the decades, yet their interest in deliberately formalizing an existing relationship as an exercise in public diplomacy by declaring the defence agreement was with multiple express purposes.

15 "In Pakistan, War Stirs Emotions and Politics" *The New York Times*, 01 Feb 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/01/world/in-pakistan-war-stirs-emotions-and-politics.html>

16 Kiani, Khaleeq "S. Arabia agrees to continue oil facility" *The Dawn*, 30 Oct 2003 <https://www.dawn.com/news/122399/s-arabia-agrees-to-continue-oil-facility> The KSA provided oil worth more than \$2 billion to Pakistan on deferred payments in 1998-1999 following the sanctions imposed after it went nuclear.

17 Boone, Jon and Dehghan, Saeed Kamali "Pakistan's parliament votes against entering Yemen conflict", *The Guardian*, 10 Apr 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/10/pakistans-parliament-votes-against-entering-yemen-conflict>

18 Haider, Mateen "Saudi Arabia largest importer of Pakistani arms" 06 May 2016, *The Dawn*, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1256712>

19 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2574464/saudi-arabia-pledges-1b-oil-facility-to-pakistan>

20 Raza, Syed Irfan, "PM Shehbaz returns after 2-day Saudi visit" *The Dawn*, 30 Oct 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1952064>



*First*, the immediate trigger was the Israeli attack on the Hamas leaders at Doha, on 09 September 2025, even while talks on a US proposal for a hostage-deal to end the Gaza war was underway.<sup>21</sup> It was not just another precision-strike, more pointedly it signalled the first time that Israel launched an operation in Qatar, nearly 1800 kms away.<sup>22</sup> The US refrained from condemning Israel for its unprovoked attack on one of its own allies in the region. It was a flagrant violation of established regional understanding and failure of existing security assurances. Technologically, the imported air-defence umbrella of Qatar was completely penetrable. The perceptions of American guarantees of protection had conspicuously eroded, sending shocks across the region. Further, the response of the extraordinary joint session between the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) showed a lukewarm response, without any consensus towards multilateral security. The anxiety at the Al Yamamah Palace in Riyadh was palpable.

*Two*, the Gaza war had destabilised the

region to such an extent that the KSA was being forced to reassess its security strategies. Riyadh's strategy of diversifying its security alliances in the backdrop of a fragile US security architecture is evident.<sup>23</sup> The earlier Israeli escalation against Iran had the propensity to directly affect Saudi interests – be it the oil facilities, or the Red Sea Naval routes. Tel Aviv's growing regional assertiveness, exhibiting a renewed dynamic of extending its military dominance to shape outcomes, has re-invoked the call within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), for a collective security architecture – a nascent Arab NATO.<sup>24</sup> The SMDA with Pakistan appears like a foundational building block towards the same, with the undertones of a Sunni Arab leadership in the Gulf.

*Three*, the escalating profile of Houthi attacks constituted another sore concern, considering that oil export infrastructure, civilian areas, desalination plants, sensitive energy facilities and even military sites were being targeted with waves of ballistic missile strikes and

drone assaults – even as deep as Yanbu,<sup>25</sup> besides other border areas. Heavy retaliatory air strikes on Yemen's Sanaa region did not appear to dent the capability of the Houthi cross-border offensives.

*Four*, owing to nuclear proliferation concerns, the earlier US impasse with Saudi Arabia against its proposal for diversification of its energy by uranium enrichment had precluded a “123 Agreement”.<sup>26</sup> Due to the lack of forward movement with the US, Riyadh sought security assurances from Islamabad as a hedge against perceived American unreliability. The SMDA evidently sent a strong signal to Washington, giving implicit indication of an extended nuclear umbrella by Pakistan. That the SMDA has pushed the US to accord Saudi Arabia the status of a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) is a game-changer for the KSA.<sup>27</sup>

### Perspective from Pakistan

For Pakistan, the pact has given more access to Saudi investment and financial support during an economic

21 Kubovich, Y., Peleg, B., Khoury, J., Suleiman, R., Samuels, B., Lis, “IDF Strikes Hamas Leaders in Doha; White House: Strike Won't Advance Israeli Goals”, 09 Sep 2025, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-09-09/ty-article/.premium/idf-strikes-hamas-leadership-in-doha-top-negotiator-kehalil-al-hayya-reportedly-killed/00000199-2ea3-d7a2-a9bf-3ebb18ca0000>

22 “Israel carries out attack against Hamas leadership in Qatar” *Saudi Gazette*, 09 Sep 2025, <https://sandigazette.com.sa/article/654836>

23 “Saudi Arabia and Pakistan sign mutual defence pact” *The Middle Eastern Eye*, 17 Sep 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-sign-mutual-defence-pact> The Crown Prince of KSA had already labelled the Gaza War as a genocide.

24 Afroz, Anonno. and Sheetol, Nazmun Afrad, “Defence pacts in history: Lessons from the world for Saudi Arabia and Pakistan”, *The Business Standard*, 25 Sep 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/big-picture/defence-pacts-history-lessons-world-saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-1245861>. The Arab world is still searching for its own version of NATO, as a collective defence organisation. While numerous proposals came forth in an emergency joint summit at Doha before the SMDA was inked (especially by Egypt seeking leadership of an Arab Unified Army), there were countries like Qatar and UAE who reportedly rejected the idea fearing regional polarisation.

25 “Houthi say they launched missile at Israeli-linked tanker near Saudi Arabia's Yanbu”, *Reuters*, 01 Sep 2025 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthi-say-they-launched-missile-israeli-linked-tanker-near-saudi-arabias-yanbu-2025-09-01/>

26 “With Iran and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. Faces a Uranium Enrichment Dilemma”, 28 Apr 2025, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/iran-and-saudi-arabia-us-faces-uranium-enrichment-dilemma>

27 “Trump defends MBS, designates Riyadh as a major non-NATO ally” *The Hindu*, 19 Nov 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/us-saudi-arabia-ties-major-non-nato-ally-investment/article70297362.ece>



*Pakistani and Saudi troops start joint counterterrorism drills in Hafar Al-Batin, Saudi Arabia, 13 February, 2020 (Photo SPA)*

crisis. In September 2025, its trade deficit had sharply increased by nearly 46% to \$3.34 billion,<sup>28</sup> worsening the pressure on its currency. Major firms like Microsoft exited the country,<sup>29</sup> and local businesses continue to struggle. Headline inflation was soaring at 5.1% affecting macroeconomic stability.<sup>30</sup>

Pakistan's strategy is to diversify its security alliances<sup>31</sup>, even as its arch-rival India has deepened its ties with the GCC nations. Hedging against over-dependence on any one major power, post **Operation Sindoor** against India, Rawalpindi felt the need to get more than just diplomatic backing from nations like Saudi Arabia, besides China and Türkiye. While overtly denying that it received foreign military support during its *Operation Bunyan Um Marsoos*,<sup>32</sup> Pakistan has yearned to be seen as a potent net-security-provider, especially as one in the first high-profile defence-pact between two friendly Muslim nations.

Notwithstanding, in the geopolitics of collective security, any defence pact can be a gamble with guarantees.

First, Pakistan has had to deliberately play down any direct reference to the nuclear dimension of the SMDA, while leveraging its diplomatic ambiguity to advantage. Pakistan's tacit nuclear deterrence for the KSA, or for any later Muslim military alliance (with Rawalpindi's doctrine of "offensive defence") could inadvertently get pitchforked against an increasingly aggressive Israel.

Second, any overreach in a volatile Middle East is

fraught with consequences of increasing commitments, which may far outweigh Pakistan's strategic appetite. There are other countries in the Middle East already showing signs of seeking similar promises with a nuclear-Pakistan<sup>33</sup> – drawing the latter into the proverbial Thucydidean trap. Qatar has already vowed to deepen its defence ties with Pakistan.<sup>34</sup> Use of "force" by Pakistan could become inescapable for diplomatic credibility at some stage, in a perpetually violence - ridden environment.

Third, getting involved in a non-Arab Islamic multinational Gaza peacekeeping force as a part of the US

proposal could be a challenging task. It could portray Pakistani appeasement of the Israeli demands for "annexation of Gaza", while turning a blind eye to the Palestinians by playing entirely to the American tune – something that its domestic constituency would reject outright. It could severely jeopardise its credibility with the Palestinians, despite offering its soldiers for the sake of the US seeking burden-sharing.

Fourth, there is a delicate balance beam between Saudi Arabia and Washington that Pakistan is treading on. A Bloomberg analysis indicated how a post-American world appears to start at Riyadh and Islamabad.<sup>35</sup> However, the US could well look away if some additional

28 "Pakistan's Trade Deficit Soars to \$3.34 Billion as Exports Plunge" 16 Oct 2025, <https://www.newsonair.gov.in/pakistans-trade-deficit-soars-to-3-34-billion-as-exports-plunge/>

29 "Microsoft closes its Pakistan office after 25 years" *The Hindu*, 05 Jul 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/microsoft-closes-its-pakistan-office-after-25-years/article69775424.ece>

30 "Pakistan September inflation seen rising to 5.1% as food prices surge - report", 29 Sep 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2617138/pakistan>

31 White, Joshua T. "The signal and substance of the new Saudi-Pakistan defense pact" 24 Sep 2025

32 <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-signal-and-substance-of-the-new-saudi-pakistan-defense-pact/>

33 "Field Marshal Munir rebukes 'external support' claims in Operation Bunyanum Marsoos", 07 Jul 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2554574/field-marshal-rebukes-external-support-claims-in-operation-bunyanum-marsoos>

34 "Iranian president bails Pakistani-Saudi defense deal as beginning of a 'comprehensive regional security system': media reports", *The Global Times*, 25 Sep 2025. Even the Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian welcomed the defence pact, remarking on the cooperation of the Muslim states of West Asia as a whole. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202509/1344460.shtml>

35 "President Zardari, Emir of Qatar vow to deepen bilateral ties", *The Express Tribune*, 05 Nov 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2575947/president-zardari-emir-of-qatar-vow-to-deepen-bilateral-ties>



*“dirty work”* is carried out by Pakistan at its behest, in a sticky cauldron of violence.<sup>36</sup>

Islamabad knows fully well that it is trading military services for financial benefits. While the domestic Pakistani politicians<sup>37</sup> welcome the Agreement, the Saudi investment in Pakistan’s infrastructure<sup>38</sup> can only succeed when there is ease-of-doing business, reliable energy supply, consistency of policy and a stable foreign exchange regime.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Rawalpindi understands incisively that the risks of getting drawn into conflicts outside its theatre are getting further accentuated beyond its rational capacity. Even so, Pakistan’s secretive outreach with Israel (whom it does not recognise) for the oversized payout demanded for the proposed Gaza deployment is being seen more as a profit-motivation than for any real *“peacekeeping”*.<sup>40</sup> Notably, the mandate for the controlled presence of Pakistani peacekeepers would be to *“neutralise Hamas elements”* while maintaining a buffer zone with the Israeli Defence Forces. Rawalpindi appears blissfully oblivious as it prepares to shoot itself in the foot.

### Introspection within the Pakistani establishment reveals a few worries.

*One*, the SMDA structures that are being put in place are gradually removing the layers of flexibility that were earlier available for decision-making at Islamabad. The financial dependency being created translates that Saudi strategic requests will have to be complied with to preclude a fiscal collapse in Pakistan.

*Two*, the domestic legitimacy for the SMDA has been shored up by highlighting that the Pakistani military is a potential leader of the Muslim World. Any reversal in this context is fraught with losing face by appearing weak on the political front as well as in the Islamic constituencies.

*Three*, with the increasing

commitments on the Afghan front, the Baloch insurgency, the FATA militancy, the growing unrest in POK, the violent urban centres in Sindh or its intermittent standoff with India, Pakistan is already saddled with security challenges far beyond its capacity.

Notwithstanding the above, a viewpoint that the eternally East-focussed Pakistan would like to subtly sponsor is that Riyadh’s political backing through the SMDA adds weight to its deterrence against India,<sup>41</sup> especially in the aftermath of **Operation Sindoor**. The outlook at the Al Yamamah Palace is however quite the contrary.

### Stance from Saudi Arabia

For Saudi Arabia, the concerns need to be seen through an entirely different set of lenses. Primarily, the KSA does not want to depend

exclusively on the USA for shoring up its deterrence against Israel.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the SMDA predictably accorded remarkable impetus to the Saudi-US Defence Agreement<sup>43</sup> during the visit of the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the White House in mid-November 2025.<sup>44</sup> Using the clout of covert extended deterrence by Pakistan in the Middle East, the Saudis obtained access to advanced American weaponry, Artificial Intelligence chips, approval for nuclear energy, besides progress towards Palestinian statehood. Riyadh offered to join the Abraham Accords, if clarity towards a two-state solution was assured.<sup>45</sup>

Economically, Riyadh is deeply concerned about the future stability of the oil markets. Its ambitious **“Vision 2030”** to diversify has faced headwinds

36 *The Hindu*, “Pakistan doing West’s dirty work for decades: Pakistan Defence Minister”, 25 Apr 2025 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/pakistan-doing-west-s-dirty-work-for-decades-pakistan-defence-minister/article69490687.ece> This was a remark by the Pakistani Defence Minister in April 2025, referring to the earlier Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan against the Russian invasion.

37 “Punjab Assembly passes resolution praising Pak–Saudi defence agreement” 04 Nov 2025, <https://24newsbd.tv/04-Nov-2025/punjab-assembly-passes-resolution-praising-pak-saudi-defence-agreement>

38 Fatima, Arooj, “Saudi Investors Invited to Pakistan’s Mega Motorway Projects”, 05 Nov 2025, <https://bloomfpakistan.com/saudi-investors-invited-to-pakistan-s-mega-motorway-projects/>

39 “Saudi MoU puts Pakistan’s promises to the test”, 09 Nov 2025 <https://www.thebansindia.com/news/international/saudi-mou-puts-pakistan-s-promises-to-the-test-1021953>

40 “Pakistan army for sale? Did Asim Munir demand \$10,000 a soldier from Israel for peacekeeping in Gaza?” *The Firstpost*, 06 Nov 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/pakistan-army-asim-munir-soldier-israel-peacekeeping-gaza-13948403.html> Pakistani social media has questioned if their army is being made available “for rent”, “on loan” or “for sale”.

41 Nawaz, N., “Understanding the Pakistan–Saudi Defense Agreement”, *Global Security Review*, 04 Nov 2025, <https://globalsecurityreview.com/understanding-the-pakistan-saudi-defence-agreement/>

42 Puri, Samir and Messmer, Marion. “Saudi Arabia and Pakistan’s mutual defence pact sets a precedent for extended deterrence” 23 Sep 2025 <https://www.chatbamhouse.org/2025/09/saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-s-mutual-defence-pact-sets-precedent-extended-deterrence>

43 “Saudi Arabia, US in Talks Over Defense Agreement” *The Diplomatic Insight*, 17 Oct 2025 <https://thediplomaticinsight.com/saudi-arabia-us-talks-defense-agreement/>

44 “F-35s, AI chips, and trillions: How MBS, once a ‘pariah’, took back Washington”, *The Times of India*, 19 Nov 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-visit-to-us-donald-trump-us-sale-of-f-35s-to-saudi-arabia-jamal-kebasboggi-murder-mbs/articleshow/125428105.cms>

45 Magid, J. “MBS tells Trump he wants to join Abraham Accords, but path to Palestinian state crucial”, *The Times of Israel*, 18 Nov 2025, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/mbs-tells-trump-he-wants-to-join-abraham-accords-but-path-to-palestinian-state-crucial/>



*Royal Saudi Land Forces and Pakistani Special Services Group troops in a joint exercise "Al Samsam-5" in Shamrakh Field, Southwest Saudi Arabia, 30 March 2015  
(photo Saudi Press Agency SPA)*

from the US on multiple counts,<sup>46</sup> necessitating hedging. Be it the US expanding its own domestic oil production, American confrontation with Iran considering that vulnerable Saudi oil infrastructure got targeted by Iranian allies in 2019, US-China confrontation effects since China is the largest importer of Saudi crude today, Washington's overtures to scale back cooperation with China, US oil price suppression to provide low prices for US consumers, or the impact of Trump's tariffs on Russian trade in the international energy markets. The SMDA serves to secure KSA's regional energy interests by linking Pakistan's reliance on Saudi oil supplies, with Riyadh's inherent need to secure its own oil supply-chain infrastructure.

Trump's Gaza Peace Plan<sup>47</sup> was initially supported by eight Islamic Nations – Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, UAE, Indonesia, Türkiye and Egypt. However, the changes that were made at the "significant 11th hour" at the request of Israel, were strongly opposed the very next day by some, including Saudi Arabia.<sup>48</sup> There was deep-seated scepticism in KSA to the Gaza Peace Summit held at Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt on 13 October 2025. While Riyadh still hopes to lead the post-war

rehabilitation efforts in Gaza only politically and financially, it is expecting the participation of peacekeeping troops from its SMDA-partner Pakistan amongst other Muslim nations.<sup>49</sup> In any case, numerous hurdles are still in the way to arrive at that post-conflict milestone in Gaza, foremost among them being a full Israeli withdrawal.

Militarily, Saudi Arabia does not have the capacity to get embroiled in any other conflict and can at most provide political and economic support to Pakistan. The Afghanistan-Pakistan escalation underscored the limitations of a largely symbolic Saudi-Pakistan defence agreement,<sup>50</sup> as far as involvement outside the Arabian theatre is concerned. The

Saudi Arabian military structure is more akin to protecting the monarchy, and the systems are not organised to contest foreign aggression. Combat effectiveness is inadequate due to the reported stratification of its soldiers from one segment, and its officering from another. The National Guard as a core is largely a private force for the royalty, and from a select tribe alone. For ensuring essential functioning with loyalty, Pakistani officers form the backbone of the National Guard as well as the Air Force. The missile systems are run with the support of foreign companies, including China, the US and Russia.

46 Roll, Stephan and Thies, Antonia. "Saudi Arabia's 'Vision 2030' and Trump's Second Term", *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Comment* 2025/C 02, 13 Jan 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/saudi-arabias-vision-2030-and-trumps-second-term>

47 Qatar Foreign Ministry tweet "Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Qatar, Jordan, UAE, Indonesia, Pakistan, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt welcome US President's efforts to end the war in Gaza" 30 Sep 2025 [https://x.com/MofaQatar\\_EN/status/1972770277319954465](https://x.com/MofaQatar_EN/status/1972770277319954465)

48 Singh, Anand, "Did Trump, Netanyahu trick Muslim countries on Gaza peace plan?" *India Today*, 01 Oct 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/did-donald-trump-benjamin-netanyahu-trick-muslim-arab-countries-on-gaza-peace-plan-hamas-2796341-2025-10-01>

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50 Arguello, Ailin Vilches, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Clashes Highlight Limits of Saudi-Pakistani Defense Pact: Experts" 17 Oct 2025, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2025/10/17/pakistan-afghanistan-clashes-highlight-limits-saudi-pakistani-defense-pact-experts/>



In sum, the Pakistani role in the Saudi Armed Forces is more like a faithful guard against any local uprising, and to protect the ruling elite. Every effort by the Pakistani Armed Forces personnel is ostensibly to preserve the status quo. However, if internal class contradictions aggravate, the KSA may need to examine major security sector reform within to build genuine intrinsic capacity, against any semblance of a rebellion. Be it oil price shocks, sectarian-incident triggers, or any kind of power struggle, the apparatus would need to prevent another Arab Spring like mobilisation.

### Chinese Commentary

Zhongnanhai at Beijing possibly read the SMDA as a considerable weakening of US regional hegemony, seeing big advantages for China.<sup>51</sup> The Arab realisation of the American self-interests in West Asia post the Israeli attack on Doha was particularly apparent by the acclaim that the SMDA garnered from various quarters in the Middle East. Chinese media initially perceived that strategic pressure on China has been relieved both in the Middle East and in South Asia, by this development.

The Pakistan-Saudi alliance signals that Middle Eastern countries are seeking

to break free from US control and move towards independent development, or alternate security guarantees, with a shift in the balance of power. An opportunity is seen by China to strengthen cooperation with Middle Eastern countries by occupying the strategic space getting vacated,<sup>52</sup> with the weakening American influence. Besides, it is felt that the oil economy faces a decline in the foreseeable future, especially with the expanding electric vehicle industry by China. This in turn could hit the common man in the oil-dependent economies, triggering many an uprising.

The Chinese defence industry anticipates a fillip, both directly as well as indirectly, since the KSA shall be financing Pakistani acquisition of more armament and latest technology from China to meet its mandate. The reputation that the Chinese weaponry has in the Islamic world is already noteworthy. The SMDA could further bolster this image, akin to the Jinlun Engineering Company (Golden Wheel

Project of the PLA Rocket Force) handling the Dongfeng missiles for Saudi Arabia. By 2021, China had also commenced building a local missile factory for Saudi Arabia, with associated technology transfer. The Chinese purportedly do not attach political strings, restrictions, or insist on data sharing in their arms deals, thus gaining greater traction in their dealings in the Middle East. Drones and counter-drone systems are being enabled since 2022 by the Chinese for the KSA.<sup>53</sup> Rainbow-4 and Wing Loong-2 systems from China have also been procured for use against the Houthis by the Saudis.

China has also taken pains to highlight that its systems like J-10C fighter jets, PL 15 missiles, and its air defence systems appear to have strengthened Pakistan in its May 2025 escalation against India. This evidently is to prevent any adverse impact on the export potential of its defence industry, and to amplify the narrative that Rawalpindi has been spinning since the operation took place.

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53 "This country spent \$15 billion to have Chinese troops stationed there and another \$3.5 billion to buy missiles, paying extremely quickly", Sobu, 24 Jul 2025, [https://www.sobu.com/a/917265682\\_121118979](https://www.sobu.com/a/917265682_121118979)



Saudi Royal Air Force (RSAF)'s officials walk with Pakistan Air Force PAF officials at Mushaf Airbase, Pakistan to participate in 2021 Air Excellence Center Exercise on March 28, 2021. (Photo Saudi Press Agency)



Members of the Pakistan Air Force, Royal Saudi Air Force and US Air Force participate in the ACES MEET 2021 exercise in Pakistan on 02 April, 2021. (Photo courtesy PAF)

### Implications for India

For India, the implications can be dissected along the economic, social, diplomatic and security planes.

*On the economic front*, India's growing rapprochement with Saudi Arabia over the last decade has strengthened its economic ties substantially – being the KSA's second-largest trading partner today.<sup>54</sup> High level Indian engagements with the Saudis continue even post the SMDA, as one of India's top three oil suppliers or as the fifth-largest trading partner of India. Compensating for reduced Russian oil, the Saudi Arabian share is likely to increase – reverting with a fillip towards its historical average of 18–20% of India's crude imports.

*On the social front*, with nearly 10.9% of the world's Muslim population hailing from India, being called by Saudi Arabia as a "Guest of Honour" to the 46th OIC Foreign Minister's Meeting in 2019<sup>55</sup> was a significant high point in the relationship. The Indian diaspora of more than 2.7 million in Saudi Arabia<sup>56</sup> is another domain wherein the people-to-people connect continues to remain strong.

With Saudi investment into Pakistan's infrastructure possibly increasing, the energies

of Pakistan's unemployed youth may be better harnessed, weaning them away from the path of terrorism and extremist ideologies. This could lead to better stability for Pakistan, even if it takes time to transform. Any developmental progress in Pakistan portends a good sign for sustainable peace in the South Asian sub-continent.

*On the diplomatic front*, the strategic partnership with Israel inked by India in November 2025 has been keenly noted by the Western neighbour,<sup>57</sup> seeking to decipher if it is indeed a rival alignment between South Asia and the Middle East. It could complicate aspects pertaining to Pakistan's deployment in the Gaza, and for its sincerity in keeping up its security

commitments against the Hamas.

*On the security front*, if Pakistan gets stretched into West Asia, it may not raise the ugly head of terrorism to instigate India. It would not be in the interest of Pakistan's deep state to provoke another debilitating surgical strike, Balakot or Sindoor when already spread thin all over. Additionally, while incentivising its troops to look towards a richly remunerative Gaza tour, their domestic risk-taking profile would further diminish. This in turn could embolden the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Balochi BLA, the ISKP and ISIS-K, the SSP and LeJ, the SLA (Sindhudesh Liberation Army), the Awami Action Committee (AAC) and Balawaristan National Front (BNF) in Gilgit - Baltistan, to name a few amongst the several fissiparous tendencies of the provinces. With a belligerent Afghanistan in its "backyard", the newest Field Marshal can only look all around himself to accord priorities.<sup>58</sup> All this could lead to an irretrievable overstretch for Pakistan.

54 Kotokey, Angana "Beyond Oil and Allies: Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact and Shifting Geopolitics", 04 Oct 2025, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2025/october/04/Beyond-Oil-and-Allies-Saudi-Pakistan-Defence-Pact-and-Shifting-Geopolitics>

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Left Photo. A Pakistan Navy officer giving training to Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF) trainees from the King Fabad Naval Academy on 16 July, 2024 (Photo Pakistan Navy). Right Photo. Saudi Crown Prince Mohamammed bin Salman (R) welcoming US President Donald Trump (L) upon his arrival in Riyadh (Photo AFP)



As far as India and the KSA are concerned on the security front, it is considered highly unlikely that any direct military involvement by Saudi Arabia would ensue in any future India-Pakistan standoff, even with the SMDA in place. Even during the May 2025 India-Pakistan flare up, an envoy from KSA reportedly visited India to help de-escalate the conflict.<sup>59</sup> In the realm of mutual training between the Indian and Saudi Armed Forces, various initiatives continue to be in place at multiple levels.

### End Note

Pakistan will have to tread carefully, and only time can accurately predict as to how the months ahead are going to unfold. While the SMDA may offer short term strategic and economic benefits to Pakistan, it places Islamabad in a precarious, high-stakes position in a volatile region. For India, as Chanakya wisely says, *the path to wisdom is paved with patience, not impulsive decisions*. India can afford to look on as a bystander, with proactive strategic patience, while strengthening its preparedness and awaiting the right time for action.

<sup>59</sup> "Did a Saudi Arabian Minister visit India during Operation Sindoor", 03 Nov 2025, [https://www.pgurus.com/did-a-saudi-arabian-minister-visit-india-during-operation-sindoor-i-e-between-may-7th-and-may-10th-if-yes-what-did-he-want-from-india/KSA's\\_Minister\\_of\\_State\\_for\\_Foreign\\_Affairs\\_visited\\_India\\_during\\_07-08\\_May\\_2025](https://www.pgurus.com/did-a-saudi-arabian-minister-visit-india-during-operation-sindoor-i-e-between-may-7th-and-may-10th-if-yes-what-did-he-want-from-india/KSA's_Minister_of_State_for_Foreign_Affairs_visited_India_during_07-08_May_2025).

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**Maj General  
H Dharmarajan**

# POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN POJK

## WHAT NEXT

September this year in Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) was volatile marked by mass protests and public demonstrations. Despite a strict clampdown by the local authorities, a large number of people voluntarily mobilised across PoJK to demand resolution of their long held grievances. This article analyses the situation.

*"Azad Jammu & Kashmir has a functional political system and by most indicators, including education, health and infrastructure, the region is performing well. While peaceful protest is a legitimate right, political unrest and chaos are damaging the economy"*

- Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry  
Director General Inter Services Public Relations

### A Simmering Summer

In September 2025, street rallies, "Shutter down" protests and "Chakka Jam" strikes were reported from multiple districts in the Province including in the capital city of Muzaffarabad and several important population centres such as Bagh, Rawalakot, Kotli, Dadyal and Mirpur. The unrest was spearheaded by the **Jammu and Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC)**, a coalition of civil society, traders, students, lawyers and political activists. The key leaders of the group included Showkat Nawaz Mir, Anjum Zaman, Sardar Umar Nazir and Advocate Saad Ansari. The protests resulted in fierce street battles as the security forces tried to forcibly disperse the protesters. At least **twenty people including several police personnel were killed and over hundred persons were injured** in the clashes lasting several days.

These violent protests may possibly be a turning point in the long simmering discontent amongst locals in PoJK. The agitation has certainly challenged the State's writ over the troubled region.

### The Struggle for Empowerment

The current protests mark the latest escalation in a periodic cycle of violent confrontations witnessed over the last two years between the local population and government authorities. The **initial unrest erupted in May 2023, when residents took to the streets against high electricity bills and acute shortages in wheat supplies**. Later in September 2023,



*Clashes took place between police and protesters in Muzaffarabad on 11 May 2024 (photo Amiruddin Mughal EPA)*

**JAAC was formally established in Muzaffarabad** bringing together the representatives of various segments of society across the Province.

Eight months later in May 2024, a fresh round of protests took place when the people, dissatisfied by non-resolution of their grievances, organised a **long march protest towards Muzaffarabad**. Five people were killed in the subsequent violent clashes with the Police. The Federal Government intervened to stabilize the situation and announced a **reduction in electricity tariffs and flour prices** besides allocating additional funds in subsidies. These measures, however, were not enough in addressing the local grievances and restoring public trust in the government.

**In July this year, the police personnel too joined the protests** and went on a "Pen down strike" demanding "parity in service benefits and long-overdue financial entitlements". As their protests escalated, a number of police stations and check posts across PoJK were deserted creating an alarming situation.

Thereafter, in August 2025, the JAAC came up with a fresh thirty eight point charter of demands which included the immediate withdrawal of legal cases filed against its cadres, demands for better education and healthcare facilities, ending the **"ruling elite perks"**, royalty for the hydropower projects located in the Province and immediate **sanction of several new infrastructure projects**.



A key demand of JAAC involves **changing the existing legislative structure by ending the system of twelve reserved seats for Kashmiri migrants** in the PoJK Legislative Assembly. These seats are reserved for approximately 464000 migrants with six seats reserved for migrants from Jammu Division and six seats for migrants from Kashmir Division. These voters, spread across Pakistan, have an extremely skewed demographic profile as approximately **30000 migrants from Kashmir Region elect the same number of seats (six) as 434000 migrants from Jammu.**

These migrant seats are thus considered an artificial tool for imposing Islamabad's monopoly on the region's political landscape, at the cost of disenfranchising the local voters. But, modifying this system would challenge the influence of State machinery over the electoral process, and will require a constitutional amendment. This demand, hence remains the most contentious and is likely to face strong resistance from the Federal Government.

### The Government Responds

Pakistan's State machinery initially responded to the protests with characteristic bravado and **several high handed measures**, even blaming foreign forces including the Indian intelligence agencies for fomenting the unrest. The government also deployed additional paramilitary forces and police contingents from other Provinces which further **alienated the local sentiment**. Mass arrests and shutting down of Internet services along with strict restrictions on the communication network failed to deter the protesters, resulting in the government being forced to come to the negotiating table.

After prolonged consultations

between JAAC and the seven member negotiating committee deputed by the Federal Government, **an agreement was finally signed on 04 October 2025 in Muzaffarabad.** The agreement, amongst other things, promised to reduce the **size of the Cabinet from 36 to 20 members** as part of the measures to curb elite privileges. The other concessions made in the agreement include the **regularisation of land** in possession of families in Mirpur under the Mangla Dam project and the creation of **separate education boards** in Muzaffarabad and Poonch. The Federal Government also agreed to conduct feasibility studies for **construction of two tunnels** at Kahori and Chaplani on the Neelum Valley Road.

It was also decided to **form an "Implementation and Monitoring Committee"** to implement and monitor the various points agreed upon in the signed agreement, though no time frame has been stipulated by the Government.

### An Uncertain Future

The mass movement across the Province which resulted in the street mobilisation of citizens on a scale not seen earlier, has challenged not only the State Authority but also the traditional political elite of PoJK.

The ruling establishment in Pakistan has always been wary of separatist groups and pro-independence demands erupting in the disputed territory. It has always tried to ensure that the **sentiments of the local population are carefully managed and controlled.** Notwithstanding, the current unrest, with its genesis primarily in local issues of governance deficit, has the **potential to escalate** into a broader public movement and **demand constitutional rights and even greater autonomy.** Given the fragile socio-political environment in

Pakistan and multiple internal security challenges being faced by law enforcement agencies, any further escalation in PoJK would have **catastrophic consequences for Pakistan's federal structure.**

The local discontent over recent political manoeuvrings by the mainstream parties has also emerged as a major issue since a large segment of the population feels that **democratic processes in PoJK have been deliberately compromised** and manipulated by Islamabad.

Soon after the current phase of unrest ended, Pakistan People's Party (PPP), with its strength of 27 members, **decided to oust the Prime Minister, Chaudhry Anwar ul Haq**, by bringing in a no-confidence motion in the 53-member Assembly. With over nine months remaining for the next elections, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) also **formally announced its withdrawal** from the Provincial Government adding to the political turmoil and marking another significant shift in PoJK's political dynamics. On 18 November 2025, Raja Faisal Mumtaz Rathore, a senior leader of PPP with maternal linkages to Poonch district was sworn in as the 16th Prime Minister, and the fourth in the last four years.

This kind of political instability in PoJK is not new as there have been **four "Prime Ministers" in the last five years.** The latest game of political musical chairs will however add to the growing public frustration over the opportunistic political manoeuvring that has become the hallmark of electoral politics in PoJK. The protests have also brought a lot of negative international attention to the situation in PoJK. Amnesty International, the



Members of a government delegation hold talks with the Joint Awami Action Committee in Muzaffarabad on 3 October 2025 (Photo Tariq Fazal Chaudhry via X for www.dawn.com)

global human rights watchdog, has called for “an impartial and transparent investigation” into the recent events including **“excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies.”**

Kashmiri diaspora communities especially in the United Kingdom also held protest rallies and public demonstrations in solidarity with the JAAC protests across several cities. During the recent Security Council debate on **“United Nations Organization: Looking into the Future”**, India too called upon Pakistan to put an end to the **“grave and ongoing human rights violations”** in areas within the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, which have been **“illegally occupied”** by Pakistan.

This adverse international media attention is seen as a serious setback to Pakistan whose diplomatic focus has always been to propagate the manufactured narrative of **“oppression, occupation and human rights violations in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.”** With the eruption of public unrest, it is the **status of PoJK in Pakistan that is now facing a critical challenge of political legitimacy** - an ironic turn-around of events.

There has also been speculation about the role of external players with the Pakistan Government blaming Indian intelligence agencies for sponsoring the protests and running a disinformation campaign to fuel the unrest. This charge has however been **dismissed as “baseless” by JAAC**, further

signifying the trust deficit that exists between locals and the Federal Government.

### Prognosis

The disputed province of PoJK finds itself at a critical juncture as the fault-lines in the local political and administrative setup have now become even more volatile. Public frustration accentuated by governance deficit over the last few years is now simmering under an unprecedented security clampdown by authorities. The people of this fragile region, controlled so far with an iron grip by Pakistan’s Federal

Government and the ubiquitous military establishment, are now torn between constitutional ambiguity and complex regional geopolitics.

Amidst this polarisation, the local population is staring at an uncertain, volatile future. But, despite occasional voices demanding freedom, the **pro-independence sentiment in PoJK is largely subdued as of now**. Continuing violence and unrest in this disputed region, long plagued by political and economic marginalisation, would certainly be Pakistan’s worst nightmare. What is certain, is that unless the Government of Pakistan gets its act right, **it won’t be long before PoJK erupts into yet another cycle of political turmoil**, instability and social chaos. Next time perhaps, the consequences could be far worse.

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*Egyptian protests at Tahrir Square, Friday of Departure, 04 February 2011 (Photographed By Mona Sosh, commons.wikimedia.org)*

# VIOLENT PROTESTS, MILITARY INTERVENTION AND REGIME CHANGE

In the last few years violent protests have rocked our neighbours, to a large extent led by youth leaders, with the Armed Forces involved in stabilizing the turmoil, and resulting in a regime change. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal are not the only examples of such violent fury on the streets, but we have seen such situations in the '*Arab Spring*' in the early 2010s. Madagascar too has witnessed riots since September 2025 and a regime change after violence rocked the capital city of Antananarivo. This essay examines the role of Armed Forces in such protest movements.

Dealing with crowds and mobs is not new to the Army, and **Aid to Civil Authorities** is a legally sanctioned activity for troops, so much so that Indian Army units have Standard Operating Procedures for such actions, and troops regularly train for these operations. In July 1980, I joined my unit which was deployed for Internal Security (IS) duties in Lower Assam. Assam had been wracked by protests, mostly non-violent in nature, led by the Asom Gana Parishad and All Assam Students Union. They were demanding the deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants – their influx had distorted the State's demography. The protest movement was mostly in the form of a Non-Cooperation Movement, but large crowds often blocked roads and we were called upon to disperse the protesters. At times, mobs attacked minority villages, and several immigrant settlements were set afire. The Nellie massacre of February 1983 was a gruesome example, wherein about 2000 villagers were killed.



*Jat community members demanding reservation in OBC quota near Atul Kataria chowk in Gurugram, January 2017 (Photo PTI)*

While operating in IS Duties, we followed the cardinal principles of **Minimum Use of Force, Impartiality and Actions in Good Faith**. These principles are time tested and earned us the respect of the population. But I must point out that the IS situation faced in the 80s and that seen in the last decade is quite different. Recent protests have been more violent, and presently the Army **'Flag Marches'** have a limited impact. Getting warring communities to arrive at an agreement is also becoming increasingly difficult, as being witnessed in Manipur.

### Agitations in India

Fortunately, our large nation has not faced any turbulent nationwide agitation in the last few decades. The Jayaprakash Narayan led anti-corruption movement of 1974-1975 was possibly our last nationwide agitation, with the anti-Mandal protests against 27% reservation for other backward classes in 1990 being another major protest movement. The anti-corruption movement from 2007 to 2011 led by Anna Hazare's India Against Corruption had national support but was non-violent in nature. Notwithstanding, India's IS situation is neither peaceful nor stable.

We have witnessed violent protests against

reservations, or for greater quotas in jobs and education by some communities – the Gujar quota agitations in 2008, 2010 and 2015 in Rajasthan, the Jat agitation of February 2016 in Haryana, the Maratha quota demand in Maharashtra in 2025 are notable examples. Roads and railway tracks (*Rasta Roko*) have been blocked in these protest movements, and many vehicles have been set on fire. Violent ethnic clashes have often been witnessed in Manipur and parts of North East India, with the latest flare-up taking place in Manipur in May 2023 - the IS situation in Manipur has still not stabilized. Some movements have sought greater autonomy or Statehood in certain areas like the Gorkhaland Agitation in North

Bengal, the Bodoland agitation in Assam, and the Ladakh Statehood demand of September 2025 has been the latest such agitation. The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in Delhi in February 2020 and the farm sector reforms agitations in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi of 2020-21 were protests against planned Government policy changes.

**So, what is the Indian scene like?** Agitations in India have invariably been limited to certain regions or places, and to certain communities, with several protests being mostly non-violent in nature. The national governance structure has hence not been challenged seriously, and democratic methods have enabled an outreach to the agitators and some resolution of the affected issues. We also have a major advantage in the availability of Central Police Organisations like Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border Security Force (BSF), etc. They have handled most agitations, and Army columns have not been called in several cases. But we cannot be complacent on IS Duties – for example, the Army had to play an active role in the Jat agitation of February 2016, and during the ethnic violence in Manipur in 2023. The Army also had to contend with large scale stone pelting in Kashmir, during operations and during convoy movements for several years between 2008 and 2019.

### Regime Changes Abroad

Violent protests have led to toppling of Governments in many countries. Amongst the earliest such agitations was the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 which led to the fall of Shah of Iran's Government in January 1979, and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran fled the country. The **'Arab Spring'** anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions spread across much of the Arab world



in the early 2010s. From Tunisia, the protests initially spread to Libya, Egypt and Yemen. The deposed rulers were Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, all in 2011; and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen in 2012. It is interesting to study the role of the Army in these countries during the protest movements and after the Governments toppled.

### Arab Spring in Tunisia

In the Tunisian Revolution, the army played a crucial role by refusing to suppress protests, which ultimately led to the downfall of President Ben Ali. Instead of using force, military leaders abstained from violence against demonstrators, a decision that allowed the protests to continue and contributed to the success of the uprising and the regime's collapse. This contrasts with other countries where armies remained loyal to the regime and participated in violent crackdowns. Consequently, the Tunisian Army is now highly trusted by the public, seen as the country's most reliable institution.

### Tahrir Square in Cairo 2011

During the Arab Spring protests in Egypt in 2011, the military sided with protesters by refusing to fire on them, which was a decisive factor in Hosni Mubarak's removal. *"Discontent within the military establishment against the rule of Mubarak had been building up, before climaxing in 2011. Military officials held that the mismanagement of Egypt's economy was a national security threat even though the army controlled a significant portion of it. Top generals saw the increasing nature of liberalization and privatization of the economy as an insurmountable contest between capital-rich firms and a bogged down military bureaucracy. The influx of businessmen and non-military appointments of government officials and parliamentarians*

*sidelined the historical influence of the military in Egyptian politics. During the first few days of the protests, military establishment leaders openly refused to condemn demonstrators. Instead many declarations legitimized the protests by stating 'the demands of the people are legitimate and to be addressed.' With protesters calling for no less than Mubarak's resignation and the police force unable to control protests, the government looked for the military to re-establish law and order. In response, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, a body consisting of the generals of each branch of the armed forces, met without the commander-in-chief President Hosni Mubarak for the first time in the entirety of Mubarak's 30-year rule".<sup>1</sup>*

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took control of Egypt after Mubarak left office, promising a transition to a new government. Despite the public's desire for a complete democratic transition, the military's primary goal was to maintain its power, influence and economic privileges. The SCAF worked

to maintain the existing political system, which included the military and business elites who had been powerful under Mubarak, effectively creating a "deep state" under a democratic facade. The SCAF re-imposed martial law and curtailed freedoms of assembly and expression, actions seen as counter-revolutionary moves against the spirit of the initial protests. The military seized power for a second time in 2013 with General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ousting President Morsi in July 2013. Sisi went on to become Egypt's President after an election in 2014 which was boycotted by opposition parties. He continues as the Egyptian President till date. So, in effect the **Arab Spring** movement in Egypt brought about a **Regime Change**, but the system of governance has remained the same – an autocratic ruler continues to govern Egypt, following in the footsteps of Presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak.

<sup>1</sup> "Ahmed, Ahmed A., "Back to Square One: Understanding the Role of the Egyptian Armed Forces" (2017). CUNY Academic Works. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/2069](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2069)



Tahrir Square, Cairo, 08 February 2011 (Photo Mona Sosh, commons.wikimedia.org)



*Anti-government protest in Sri Lanka on April 13, 2022 in front of the Presidential Secretariat, Colombo (Photo AntanO, commons.wikimedia.org)*

### Chaos in Libya

Libya's popular uprising against the authoritarian rule of Muammar Gaddafi began in February 2011. The protests against Gaddafi's rule turned into an armed conflict as security forces, loyal to Gaddafi, clashed with protesters, using helicopters and warplanes to bomb them. In August, rebel forces launched an offensive on the government-held Libyan coast ultimately capturing the capital city of Tripoli, while Gaddafi evaded capture and loyalists engaged in a rearguard campaign. On 16 September 2011, the National Transitional Council was recognised by the United Nations as the legal representative of Libya, replacing the Gaddafi Government. On 20 October 2011, Muammar Gaddafi was captured and killed in Sirte. But Libya did not stabilize under the National Transitional Council, and civil war has been continuing in Libya till date.

Let us fast forward to our subcontinent and this decade.

### Aragalaya in Sri Lanka 2022

The Aragalaya (struggle) protests in Sri Lanka began in March 2022. The government

was heavily criticized for mismanaging the Sri Lankan economy, resulting in an economic crisis involving severe inflation, daily blackouts, and a shortage of fuel, domestic gas and other essential goods. The protesters' main demand was the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and key officials from the Rajapaksa family. The government declared a state of emergency and imposed curfews, granting the military extensive powers to arrest civilians and use force against those disobeying orders. Troops were deployed to guard key locations such as the Presidential Palace, the Prime Minister's Office and the Parliament building. Security forces, including the Army, used tear gas, water cannons, and eventually physical force during various confrontations. On 22 July 2022, the Army

tried to clear the main anti-government protest camp in Colombo, which resulted in injuries to dozens and arrests of protesters and journalists.

The Army Chief issued public statements urging protesters to stop violence and warned that security forces were legitimately empowered to use force to manage the situation. While the military was seen by some as potentially supporting the ruling elite, the Army Chief publicly stated the forces' allegiance was to the constitution and not a specific government or public group, aiming to prevent violence and return to peacetime conditions. In July 2022, protesters occupied the President's House in Colombo, President Rajapaksa had to flee and about a week later, on 20 July, Parliament elected Ranil Wickremesinghe as President. Overall, the Army played a supportive role to the Government, and civil governance continues in Sri Lanka as per the Constitution.

### Regime Change in Bangladesh

The July Mass Uprising, also considered a Gen Z revolution or the Student-People's Uprising, was a mass uprising in Bangladesh in 2024. It began as a quota reform movement for government jobs in early June 2024, led by the Students Against Discrimination. The movement escalated into a full-fledged mass uprising after mass killings of protesters in late July. The protests intensified, with students staging the "Bangla Blockade". On 4 August, thousands of protesters convened at Dhaka's Shahbag intersection, obstructing it as a form of civil disobedience and demanded the resignation of the Government. The next day, the protesters called for a Long March to Dhaka in defiance of



a nationwide curfew to press Sheikh Hasina to resign. The Long March to Ganabhaban forced her to resign and she fled to India along with her sister Sheikh Rehana.

#### Why did the situation deteriorate?

It is assessed that the heavy handed reaction of the security forces, including the Bangladesh Army in July 2024 inflamed the passions of the students. Between 16 July and 11 August over 1000 individuals reportedly died in the uprising and more than 400 students lost their eyesight. Additionally, more than 20000 were injured, and over 11000 were arrested nationwide. There was significant unease among the troops, which likely pressured General Waker-uz-Zaman, the Chief of the Army Staff as soldiers were witnessing the events. Several former Bangladesh Army officers held a press briefing urging soldiers to return to camps and refrain from getting involved in the political crisis or being used against civilians. In August, some retired Army officers also joined the protesters, and the army did not intervene.

After Sheikh Hasina's departure, the Bangladesh Army Chief took control of the situation and asked the protesters to suspend the agitation. Hasina's ouster triggered a constitutional crisis, leading to the formation of an interim government led by economist Muhammad Yunus, as the Chief Adviser. Thus in Bangladesh, while the Army initially worked with the Government to quell the agitation, it then nudged the Sheikh Hasina Government to quit, once it realized the level of anger in the masses. The Bangladesh Army hence retained its institutional role, and facilitated the establishment of a civilian interim Government. This was in sharp contrast to previous coups when General Zia-ur-Rahman in 1975 and General H M Ershad in 1982 took over the reins of Government.

#### Gen Z Protests in Kathmandu 2025

In September 2025, large-scale anti-corruption protests and demonstrations shook Nepal, predominantly organized by Generation Z students and young citizens. Also known as "**the Gen Z protests**", a nationwide ban on numerous social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, X, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Reddit, Signal and WhatsApp was apparently the trigger for the violence. The social media shutdown was allegedly prompted by a social media trend highlighting nepotism, focusing on the undue privileges enjoyed by the children and relatives of influential political leaders in Nepal. This "**Nepo Kid**" trend prompted significant public anger, particularly from Generation Z users.

The movement expanded to encompass broader issues of governance, transparency and political accountability. On 08 September, protesters attempted to enter Nepal's Parliament, the security forces

responded with tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets and live ammunition. At least 17 victims were killed in front of the Parliament building. The protests escalated, with police violence against children too. At least 72 people were killed, including a 12-year-old child.

**A Digitally Coordinated Agitation.** Youth participatory groups, particularly **Hami Nepal** (a non-governmental organization), used **Discord** online communities (called "servers" in Discord) and Instagram channels as central organising tools in the Gen Z protests. Anyone could join the **Hami Nepal Discord** group, making it vulnerable to trolls. **Hami Nepal Discord** advocated violence against the Nepalese leadership. Tactical discussions on Discord included procurement and use of Molotov cocktails, suggestions to seize ammunition from police stations, and instructions on disabling aeroplane tyres using acetylene gas. After the police response led to 19 deaths, organisers in some Discord servers



*Bangladesh Quota Reform Movement, Shabbagh, Kantaban, Science Lab, 12 July 2024  
(Photo Rownak Shabriar Ruban, commons.wikimedia.org)*



Nepalese Gen Z protesters set fire to Chitwan revenue office (Photo Himal Suvedi, commons.wikimedia.org)

asked members to stop attending classes. They called for an indefinite closure of colleges and schools until the government accepted accountability for the fatalities. Protestors used VPNs and posted flyers with QR codes to evade the social media ban.

On 09 September 2025, the protesters targeted several prominent locations in Kathmandu, including the residences of the Prime Minister and the President, as well as the homes of various government ministers and Members of Parliament, which were set ablaze by protesters. The Parliament building was set on fire. The Headquarters of the UML and Nepali Congress were vandalized, with party flags stripped and burned.

**Role of Nepal Army.** The Nepal Army facilitated the safe evacuation of politicians from affected areas and evacuated them to Tribhuvan International Airport, while attempting to control the escalating incidents of arson and destruction. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli resigned and was evacuated from his residence by a Nepal Army helicopter. Multiple reports suggested that General Ashok Raj Sigdel, Nepal's Chief of Army Staff advised Oli to resign to enable the Army

to restore peace – a strikingly similar pattern as observed in the July-August 24 Bangladesh protests. At around 2200 hours on 09 September, the Nepal Army stated that it would "*take charge*" of the country in the absence of the Prime Minister to ensure "*law and order*" is maintained. General Sigdel invited the agitating groups for talks. The next day, Nepal Army forces were seen patrolling neighbourhoods in critical areas. General Sigdel again encouraged protesters to remain peaceful, and met with **Hami Nepal** and asked them to suggest nominees for an interim leader who would oversee national elections. The Nepal Army acted as a steadying presence, with neutrality, and with national interest as the guiding beacon.

#### Online Election of a New

**Leader.** Sudan Gurung, founder of the youth organization **Hami Nepal** and widely regarded as one of the central figures of the 2025 Gen Z protests, emerged as a leading voice advocating for transparency and digital democracy. Gurung coordinated online discussions through Discord and served as a liaison between protest organizers and the Nepal Army during the transition period. On a Discord server with over 100000 members, more than 10000 users met virtually in a Discord channel to debate. After discussions, several polls, and the use of sub-channels for fact-checking, the members settled on Sushila Karki, who was sworn in as the first female Prime Minister of Nepal.

#### Toolkits and Engineering Protests

Foreign powers have allegedly effected regime changes in many countries, directly or indirectly. Mercenaries were hired in the last century in many African nations to topple existing governments, at times there was direct military intervention, as was done by the Western powers in Iraq in 2003. Considering the difficulties and fallout of direct military action, the global powers prefer indirect methods to overthrow a Government. In this era of widespread use of social media, influencers, fake videos and misinformation, perceptions of communities and people can be subtly altered. But social media can also be used effectively by ruling regimes to counter the negative social media campaign against them, by deep fakes, doctored visuals and reels, and by creating dissension within the protesters.

There has been a lot of speculation that many protests and agitations in the last decade have been triggered by such influence operations. Some operations have received support and funds from



foreign agencies, but many such external designs do not meet with success. In India, there were insinuations that toolkits had been prepared to organize and escalate the anti-CAA riots in Delhi, and the farm sector reforms agitation (Pro-Khalistan elements based in USA and Canada played an active role). In some instances in India and abroad, it was assessed that protests had been fuelled by external powers and even elections have been influenced. The Regime Change in Bangladesh in August 2024 was also suspected to be linked to a foreign power.

Undoubtedly, internet, social media, information campaigns affect perceptions, and these can be managed to increase anger against Governments – the toolkits play up negative actions, governance flaws, corruption allegations and the anti-incumbency factor comes into play. But, for these methods to succeed, there has to be strong distrust and disillusionment with the Governments in power. Unemployment amongst the youth and radicalization contribute immensely in violent protests, and the young people or Gen Z are the major drivers in violent protests. The agitations in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal as also in other nations took place primarily because there was widespread discontent against the ruling regime, for various reasons. The military leadership needs to remain abreast of such discontent, and inimical forces attempting to exploit the despair.

### Takeaways

Violent protests and agitations will take place periodically in most parts of the world, because of different reasons. Protests have engulfed developed nations like USA, UK, France, etc too. As population densities increase, as demographic changes occur, as young people face unemployment,



*Nepalese Gen Z protesters in front of Bharatpur mahanagarpalika office, 2025 (Credit wikivand.com)*

disgruntlement and friction will invariably develop within societies and lead to violent conflagration. In India, most agitations will have a regional or local effect, and would probably be controlled by Central Police Organisations. But the Army needs to remain prepared, as at times the violence may spiral upwards.

A major catalyst in violence escalation is casualties. In Colombo, Dhaka and Kathmandu, the surge in casualties due to police or Army firing inflamed the protesters, and the clashes intensified. While tackling violent mobs, the security forces have to strictly adhere to the principle of **Minimum Use of Force** – to keep the violence and casualty levels under check. Tear Gas, water cannons, rubber bullets and such non-lethal weapons held with Police organisations would be the preferred gear to tackle the rioters. Social media is also a vital communication medium for protesters, and is also used to inflame passions. Security forces must monitor social media, and take preventive steps in time.

**How should the Army respond in case of an extensive and widespread agitation?** The examples set by the Sri Lankan, Bangladesh and Nepal Army can serve as a guide. These

Armies initially supported the Government to contain the violence and to maintain law and order. The troops acted with restraint and impartially, while the military leadership tried to break the impasse. Once the Governments resigned, the Army stepped in to restore order, negotiate and establish an interim civilian Government. That the Army Chiefs did not take over and assume power indicates their wisdom. Military leaders generally are not aware of the intricacies of national problems, social divisions, economic and trade compulsions, financial markets, industrial development and end up doing greater damage to the nation and democratic institutions. The concerned Army too loses its sheen, its calibre and the support of the people. Generals Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf and military control in Pakistan are clear examples of long term damage to a nation's fabric. Lord John Dalberg-Acton's quote "*Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*" is most apt.

So, while the military may be required to tackle protest movements, it should also facilitate a transition to another acceptable civilian Government in case of major upheaval by the masses.

# RISE OF THE PLA AIR FORCE

## SHAPING CHINA'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

The recent air power employment in **Operation Sindoor** has finally exposed the deep collaborative engagements between the Air Forces of India's two adversaries China and Pakistan – the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). It was the first time the indigenous weapons and platforms of the Chinese aviation industry were employed in combat, albeit by their 'iron brother' and long-time strategic partner Pakistan, against a common adversary - India. An assessment of the PLAAF follows.

The PLAAF assumes importance not only as a major air power, both in size and growing capability, but as an increasingly potent instrument of national power in the India-China perspective, in Beijing's Taiwan priority and in the Indo-Pacific security construct. Considering the background of the 1962 Sino-Indian war, the on and off border skirmishes due unsettled border disputes, the Chinese hand in Sindoor, and the larger context of India's position in Asia and globally, the rise of the PLAAF assumes a serious military and strategic significance.

### Early Years

The birth of Chinese air power thought goes back to Sun Yat-Sen, who with his exposure to Western air power thinking of Douhet and the American Billy Mitchell, believed in its need for the nation's security.<sup>1</sup> The Nationalist leadership according to Zhang, invested in an air force in 1930s in the firm belief of its ability to bring isolated provinces under control, and because of the Japanese occupation of China's North East. Considering the heavy losses suffered in the war against Japan, where the Air Force strength reduced from seven hundred to eighty combat aircraft,<sup>2</sup> the Soviet Union supported China with 885 aircraft over the next five years, and the USA provided 1394 aircraft



Four U-2 spy planes shot down by China in the 1960's

1. Xiaoming Zhang, *Chinese Air Power*, Global Air Power, Op Cit, Olsen, p.260  
2.Wang Daoping, *The History of the War of resistance Against Japanese Aggression*, Vol 3, PLA Press, Beijing, 1991, p. 382, based on note cited by Zhang, *Ibid*.



from 1942 till the war's end.<sup>3</sup> But the Air Force was unable to keep the Nationalists from losing control of the mainland to the Communists in the Civil war in 1949, and they fled to Taiwan. The Communist air force was thereafter built up using all the assets and infrastructure left behind by the Nationalists. Mao Zedong and the communist leadership never gave serious consideration to air power until victory against the Nationalists seemed possible in 1947. Given the need to bring Tibet and Taiwan under it, and the necessity of defending China from internal and foreign enemies, Mao remarked – “*We must be devoted to the construction of an air force*”.<sup>4</sup>

Initially because the PLA leadership did not want an autonomous aviation force, no consideration was given to creating an independent Air Force. Consequently, the initial leadership was from the Army without any experience in aviation, and the PLAAF organisation was mainly administrative as the focus was on Air Defence (AD) of its cities from the bombings by the Nationalist Air Force. In October 1950, the Central Military Commission formally established the PLA Air Defence Headquarters (HQ) to oversee all AD forces. However, the vulnerability to the bombings spurred the leadership to build its own Air Force and a team was sent to the Soviet Union, which aided with 434 aircraft and helped establish their pilot training. In its first development plan between 1950 and 1953, the PLAAF established about 100 aviation regiments, repaired 100 airfields, the number of aircraft repair factories were increased and eleven more aircraft repair factories were set up. The training capacity was also expanded. During this period the PLAAF also took part in air operations in Tibet. From April 1950 to November 1952, it opened 25 navigation routes, undertook

1282 sorties of air drops from Chengdu and dropped 51 tonnes of load. It also undertook offensive missions against the Tibetan ‘bandits’ in Gansu and Sichuan regions using TU-2 bombers and La-9 fighters to drop 72 bombs and fired 1300 rounds of ammunition.<sup>5</sup>

### The Korean War

In the Korean war, the rapid increase in its size prompted General Vandenberg, the USAF Chief of Staff to announce with concern in November 1951, that China had become one of the world's major air powers.<sup>6</sup> The original employment philosophy of the PLAAF was support of ground troops, who were disadvantaged due to the US control of the air and its technological superiority. It therefore chose a strategy of accumulated strength and concentrated employment, first by providing aerial protection of its logistic lines under the coordination of the experienced Soviet Air Force, and second by building airfields in Korea to enable direct close air support to its troops and launch full-scale air-operations. This strategy failed because the USAF bombarded North Korean airfields which prevented all hopes of forward deployment, and thereby

providing direct support to its ground troops.<sup>7</sup> Forced to operate only from airfields inside China, the PLAAF limited their strategy to air superiority in North-western Korea. Also, the limited AD centred Soviet Air Force approach and the limited range of its fighters restricted the scope of PLAAF operations to protection of its key communication lines, military and industrial assets in Korea and indirect support to ground forces.<sup>8</sup>

The area between the Yalu and Chongchon rivers was to become a dangerous place for the UNC aircraft and earned it the famous name ‘**MiG Alley**’.<sup>9</sup> In the war, the PLAAF claimed to have shot down 330 UNC aircraft against 231 of their own. In contrast the USAF claimed exchange ratios varying from 10:1 to 14:1 in their favour, which are an exaggeration. More recent researches indicate that it was probably closer to 2:1,<sup>10</sup> and the kill ratio between USAF F-86 and the Soviet MiG-15 to be even, possibly 1.3:1<sup>11</sup> The Communist air forces included the Soviets, North Koreans and the Chinese, of which the Soviets were definitely most experienced, but the technological advantage enjoyed by the UNC air forces and training played a

3. Wang Zhenghua, *Foreign Military Assistance to China During the Resistance War, Around the World Bureau, Taipei, 1987, p.114, based on note quoted cited by Zhang, ibid.*

4. Mao Zedong, *A Collection of Mao Zedong's Military Papers, Vol 5, Military Science Press and Central Archival and Manuscript Press, Beijing, 1993, p. 471-477, cited by Zang, Ibid.*

5. Kenneth W. Allen, Glenn Krumel and Jonathan Pollack, *China's Air Force Enters the 21st Century, RAND, Santa Monica, 1995, p.40*

6. Zhang, *Op Cit*, p. 259

7. *Ibid*, p.268

8. Williams and Garafola, *Op Cit*, p.39

9. Alan Stephens, *The Air War in Korea, 1950-1953, History of Air Warfare, Op Cit, Olsen, p. 98*

10. Robert F. Dorr, Jon Lake and Warren E. Thompson, *Korean War Aces, Osprey Publishing, London, 2005*

11. Roger Thompson, *Reforming America's Overhyped Airpower, Straus Military Project at POGO; issued Sept. 17, 2013, <https://www.defense-aerospace.com/articles-view/feature/5/148003/an-iconoclastic-look-at-us-airpower.html>, accessed on May 17, 2021*



*A 'deterrent air power' mass produced MiG 19s and MiG 21s*

significant role in the outcome of the air war. The key takeaway for Mao from this war was that air bombardment caused lesser casualties to his forces when compared with ground fire.<sup>12</sup> This coupled with the inability of the PLAAF to provide air support to the ground forces, led to the firm belief that ground forces would prevail against stronger forces and the continuing emphasis of the PLAAF on AD. The heavy ground casualties inflicted by the USAF also brought in the realisation that aside from being one of the largest air forces, it needed to become a strong one.

### The Taiwan Crisis & Vietnam War

By 1955, the Soviets provided support for the build-up of the PLAAF with 4400 aircraft, as well as trained the pilots and technicians.<sup>13</sup> The lack of prior aviation experience and the extensive Soviet assistance meant that the PLAAF organisation, initial doctrines, tactics and training were similar. The focus was on AD, and support to land forces, as the concept of independent air operations or strategic bombing did not form a part of the PLAAF orientation. Post Korea, a series of transformations took place beginning with the merger of the PLA AD

with the PLAAF in 1957. The six Military Region Air Forces (MRAF) were renamed and aligned with the PLA Military Regions (MR). In 1958, the PLAAF was involved in the operations in the Taiwan strait crisis against the Nationalists, from mid-July till the end of October, during which period it claims to have flown 3778 sorties, fought 13 air combats, shooting down 14 aircraft and damaging nine, and said to have lost five and suffered damage on five aircraft. The USAF claimed to have fought twenty-five air combats, shooting down between 32 and 35 aircraft, damaged ten and lost four. The main outcome was that PLAAF had a permanent presence across Taiwan, which could no longer dominate the Chinese air space in the region.<sup>14</sup> In 1961,

the CIA supplied the Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) with the U-2 high spy planes essentially to monitor China's nuclear testing. These missions were flown as high altitude flights in subsequent years, during which PLAAF claimed to have shot down five aircraft between 1962 and 1967, using the Soviet supplied SA-2 missiles.<sup>15</sup>

The split with the Soviet Union in 1960 had a serious adverse effect on the PLAAF development, and with no other external support had to rely on self-reliance. The aircraft produced in this period were unreliable with many failures and crashes, with pilot and maintenance training having almost stopped. With lack of engines and spares, flying reduced by 41% in 1960 which continued till 1963.<sup>16</sup> In 1962, China also fought a war with India, where the Indian Air Force was not brought into operations due to the perceived threat of escalation and the consequent possibility of PLAAF bombing Indian cities. The reality of the weak operational status of the PLAAF indicates that this was highly unlikely, because apart from other low serviceability and maintenance issues, the service was also adversely impacted by shortage of fuel.<sup>17</sup> The political upheavals accompanying the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 stymied the growth of an independent PLAAF strategy and doctrine, while in the same period its size grew to fifty air divisions of which two thirds were short range fighters.<sup>18</sup> Even though the PLAAF

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth W. Allen and Christina I. Garafola, *70 Years of the PLA Air Force*, China Aerospace Studies Institute, Montgomery, p.36

<sup>14</sup> Allen, Krumel and Pollack, *Op Cit*, p.64-69

<sup>15</sup> Allen and Garafola, *Op Cit*, p.46

<sup>16</sup> Allen, Krumel and Pollack, *Op Cit*, p. 71-72

<sup>17</sup> Iqbal Chand Malhotra, *Red Fear: The China Threat*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New Delhi 2020

<sup>18</sup> Zhang, *Op Cit*, p. 280



took part in the Sino-Vietnam War in 1979, in the month-long operations between February and March, it did not see any combat. It flew 8500 sorties of air patrols but nil ground support or air combat, as Deng Xiaoping did not want the war to escalate due to the use of air power. In the end it maintained that its air operations deterred the Vietnamese Air Force from engaging the PLAAF. This misplaced 'deterrent' view was to continue in the years to follow, as was evident in the continued production of obsolete platforms to maintain its numerical size. It manufactured over 4000 J-6 (MiG 19 variant) between 1980 and 1986 to maintain what it considered a 'deterrent' air power,<sup>19</sup> large but of legacy technology, and limited operational capability.

### The Gulf War: Winds of Change

To the Chinese leadership, the definitive role and performance of the US-led military coalition in the Gulf War of 1991, was a turning point. The PLAAF closely examined the coalition's capabilities, warfighting tactics, and strengths, particularly those of the US during the Gulf War. According to Colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui - 'Only "Desert Storm" can provide ready-made examples when we try to use previous wars to discuss what constitutes war in the age of technological integration-globalization. It is still, in some ways, not just the only [example], but the classic [example], and thus the only apple worthy of our careful examination.'<sup>20</sup> Fully aware of the inherent shortcomings, Deng assessed that the wars in the future would be local and limited and air dominance would be a critical necessity.<sup>21</sup> His views prioritised the military spending on the Air Force to increase, while PLA's share came down from 18.5 % in 1979, to 8 % by 1989. But he also ensured downsizing of the Air Force to one third of its size by early 1990.<sup>22</sup>

Deng also advised the PLAAF that active defence concept must also contain an offensive element.<sup>23</sup>

This triggered the PLAAF's modernization and transformation drive and led to changes in its organisational, technological, warfighting, training and doctrinal concepts. It has made similar strides in key technological areas such as precision-guided weapons and missiles, as well as combat aircraft.<sup>24</sup> There was a clear focus on modernising its fighter fleet, moving away from the mainstay Soviet-era legacy platforms toward an inventory with a higher proportion of fourth generation and higher aircraft. This was primarily to counter the air threat posed by the US Carrier Strike Group (CSG) in the region, as well as to maintain control over air and maritime domains of interest. After years of struggling with access to advance technology which it overcame with copying and reverse engineering Western weapons and platforms, the

Chinese military aviation industry today has built up significant developmental and production capabilities and has remained committed to self-reliance.

China's military capabilities have grown at an impressive rate since 2009, thanks to consistent increases in defence spending.<sup>25</sup> Rising defence expenditure over the years has made the People's Republic of China (PRC) the world's second-largest military spender after the United States. Because the PRC government has been inconsistent in its reported defence spending, the official military budget provides an incomplete picture. It reported a defence budget of just under \$178 billion in 2019, while the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimated it to be \$261 billion,<sup>26</sup> which has grown to reach \$314 billion in 2024.<sup>27</sup> Based on available economic data and growth projections, the PRC can continue to

19 Ibid, p281

20 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999 at <https://www.c4i.org/unrestricted.pdf>, Accessed on May17, 2021. The authors of this book published in 1999, identify the blind spots in the technology-driven American military doctrine. They argue that Douhet's prediction that 'the battlefield in the air will be the decisive one' seems to have achieved belated confirmation. However, everything that happened in the air over the Gulf far exceeded the imagination of this proponent of achieving victory through the air. Whether in Kuwait or Iraq, none of the air combat involved gallant duels for air supremacy, but represented an integrated air campaign that blended all the combat operations, such as reconnaissance, early-warning, bombing, dogfights, communications, electronic strikes, command and control, etc., together, and it also included the struggle for and occupation of outer space and cyberspace (p. 68).

21 Deng Xiaoping, *Modern Warfare requires Seizure of Air Superiority*, Deng Xiaoping Junshi Wenji, Vol 3, p.153, cited by Zhang Op Cit

22 Deng Xiaoping, *Downsizing Troops and Enhancing Troop Quality*, Deng Xiaoping Junshi Wenji, Vol 3, p. 263-265, cited by Op Cit

23 Zhang, Op Cit, 283

24 Joel Whithnow and Phillip C. Saunders, 'Chinese Military Reform in the Age of Xi Jinping: Drivers, Challenges, and Implications', *China Strategic Perspectives*, (10), National Defence University Press, Washington, D.C., March 2017

25 Adam P. Liff and Andrew S. Erickson, 'Demystifying China's Defence Spending: Less Mysterious in the Aggregate', *The China Quarterly*, (216), December 2013, pp. 805-830.

26 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-down-chinas-2020-defence-budget>, accessed on May 17, 2021

27 [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/yb25\\_summary\\_en.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/yb25_summary_en.pdf)



President Xi Jinping with PLAAF officers and personnel

increase its defence spending for at least the next five to ten years, according to official defence spending figures. Its aviation industry has already displayed its sixth generation aircraft development capability along with development of the new generation bomber H 20, while its fighter production rate is estimated to be a staggering 240 platforms a year!

Despite the total number of PLAAF fighters, multirole fighters, and ground-attack aircraft shrinking from 2453 platforms in 2007 to 2065 in 2025, it is the third largest Air Force in the world. China did not engage in major military conflicts in the 2010s, allowing the PLAAF to accept a decline in strength while waiting for more capable aircraft to become available. Today it operates mostly fourth and fifth generation fighters, with a similar story evident in its bomber force which is smaller than it was in 2007 but is much more capable. The PLAAF has increased both the overall numbers and the capability of its support aircraft fleet. Its inventory of fighters capable of long-duration, all-weather, long-range offensive missions with significant combat persistence is steadily growing. In effect, the PLAAF

inventory is adapting to its anticipated future missions, which include its Taiwan mission, maritime interests in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and the larger Indo-Pacific construct, and, more recently, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).<sup>28</sup>

### A Strategic Air Force

Post the Gulf War, the Chinese adopted a long-term vision of air power capability development over the following decades through systematic strengthening of the PLAAF. It focused on organisational transformation in the first decade of this century, while the focus in the second decade was on modernization, self-sufficiency, capability and capacity development. Since 2004, the PLAAF has

used a service-specific strategic concept for offensive and defensive operations that integrates air and space. The Chinese leadership and the official state media have since endorsed the PLAAF as a Strategic Air Force.<sup>29</sup> During a visit to the PLAAF HQ in 2014, President Xi Jinping emphasized 'accelerate the construction of a powerful people's Air Force that integrates air and space,' according to the need. And referred to the PLAAF as a "strategic service" capable of "playing a decisive role" in "the overall situation of national security and military strategy".<sup>30</sup>

The PLAAF which was already growing in strength and stature, took on a larger role in the PRC's national interests. It also succeeded in expanding its presence and influence in the maritime domain, which had previously been the PLA Navy's (PLAN) exclusive domain. This allowed PLAAF to expand from the tactical role of mainland China's AD, to assume a much larger strategic role in support of the country's increasingly coercive foreign policy. The PLAAF has emerged as a tool for political signalling, coercion and harassment in recent years, while simultaneously expanding its operational capabilities, thanks to its persistent and aggressive actions. With its aggressive foreign policy, the PRC's maritime and aerial actions in the region have consistently shown little respect for international norms and a rules-based order.<sup>31</sup> A 2023 reorganization transferred most PLAN land-based aviation units

28 Diptendu Choudhury, *Expanding Role of PLAAF in China's National Security Strategy, Strategic Analysis*, Taylor and Francis, 44:6, 2020, p.521-52,

29 Michael S. Chase, Cristina Garafola, *China's Search for a Strategic Air Force*, China Brief, 15 (19), at <http://jamestown.org/program/chinas-search-for-a-strategic-air-force>, Accessed on May 17, 2021

30 [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2057.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2057.html), Accessed on May 18, 2021

31 Choudhury, *Op Cit*, p.530





*A possible prototype image of China's H-20 bomber*

(including fighters, bombers, radars, airfields, and AD units) to the PLAAF, consolidating maritime strike and AD capabilities within one service. Gaining full responsibility for the coastal AD and maritime strike missions (and control of the PLAN personnel and equipment associated with those missions) has expanded the PLAAF personnel and force structure. This change also limited the need for cross-service cooperation at the tactical level, which posed difficult command and control challenges. At the same time, it embraced jointness at the operational level by forcing the PLAN to rely on the PLAAF to execute critical maritime strike missions.

A recent study summarises several larger reasons for the PLAAF's unprecedented growth. Rising defence budgets were one of the most influential drivers of force structure by offsetting higher procurement, operations, and maintenance costs of advanced aircraft. The progress of China's defence industry emerged as an extremely significant factor that eased common force modernization trade-offs, allowing the PLAAF to forge a new path of a high-tech and domestically produced Air Force. The PLAAF has significantly reduced, but not eliminated, its dependence on foreign suppliers. It

managed the difficult trade-offs by choosing to wait for the domestic aviation industry to overcome technology constraints and catch up with foreign producers. Beijing's grand strategy of avoiding conflict allowed the PLAAF to exercise patience in its force modernization decisions instead of having to procure expensive foreign systems or enormous quantities of available but less capable domestic systems.<sup>32</sup> According to Anthony Cordesman, USA and China are now competing superpowers, and that China's growing military forces are developing to the point where they will be able to challenge the USA. He claims that the region has become a focal point for major country competition, and that the United States' strengthening of its Asia-Pacific military alliances has complicated regional security.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

China has succeeded in transforming a large but legacy Air Force with old airframes, limited tactical capabilities, and out-of-date training into a modern, dynamic, technologically advanced, and increasingly well-trained aerospace force. There is no doubt that the PLAAF has gained significant strategic influence and is already capable of defending its First Island Chain. The deployment of a PLAAF-assisted maritime force inside the First Island Chain has alarmed both the US and its neighbours. The issues are not just about freedom of navigation but also about sovereignty. The inevitable extension of this capability to the Second Island Chain soon will undoubtedly challenge US power projection and have an impact on the

<sup>32</sup> Lauren Edson and Dr. Phillip Saunders *Rightsizing the PLA Air Force: Revisiting an Analytic Framework*, National Defense University Press, *Joint Force Quarterly* 118, July 15, 2025, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/4244397/rightsizing-the-pla-air-force-revisiting-an-analytic-framework/>

<sup>33</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, 'China's New 2019 Defence White Paper: An Open Strategic Challenge to the United States, But One Which Does Not Have to Lead to Conflict', <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-2019-defence-white-paper>, Accessed on May 19, 2021



*PLAAF has shifted the balance in its favour over Taiwan and the Second Island Chain*

Indo-Pacific region. The Chinese Air Force has now become a key part of China's defensive-offensive strategy, helping to protect not only the country's economic lifelines of trade and energy, but also its sovereignty and geopolitical interests.

The PLAAF's future growth trajectory as a significant player of the PLA's military capability is a serious future threat in India's larger security matrix, especially in the continental domain where the vertical dimension will play a defining role. Similarly, in the regional maritime power competition, land-based air power will be necessary along with carrier-based maritime power to secure the vertical dimension for greater control over oceans. China has already jumped ahead of the pack in terms of coercively using air power as a tool of foreign policy in the region. There are clear lessons for India from the PLAAF's use of air power to advance its national interests. While it has naturally focused on its seaboard and maritime spaces, it will soon shift its attention to the West and South to counter India's continental threat and to support

and bolster its currently constrained CPEC and BRI outreach westwards. Air power will continue to play a critical role in any conflict in the mountains, and future PLAAF capacity development goals in the TAR region will reflect this.



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**Air Marshal  
(Dr) Diptendu Choudhury**





# DEFEATING LEFT WING EXTREMISM IN CENTRAL INDIA

Left Wing Extremism (LWE) or Maoism in India, has its roots in the Telangana struggle of 1946-51. The current genre of rebellion commenced in 1967 in Naxalbari, West Bengal. This extremist movement has been through a roller-coaster ride affecting several states. In 2014, LWE affected 182 districts, going down to 90 in 2018, 70 in 2021 and 38 in 2024. The present government is resolute about **wiping out Maoism from the country by March 2026 - a plausible aim given the current context of its shrinking footprints**. This article delves into **military and non-military nuances of Maoism in India**.

## The Current Situation

LWE related violence has decreased by almost 59% over the last decade. Since the early 1980s, Dandakaranya forest region (DKR) that overlaps boundaries of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra, has been the primary conflict zone.

The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) data regarding the number of insurgents vis-a-vis security personnel killed over last 25 years, points to the downward trend in insurgency indices from 2013 onwards. The Central Committee of Maoists in its plenum meet of October 2011 and March 2013 acknowledged that the revolutionary movement had entered a difficult phase since 2011.<sup>1</sup> Empirically the above inference is supported by **decreasing number of fatalities of security personnel after 2013**. It is clear from the data (**table next page**) that the insurgency intensified from the year 2000 onwards and peaked in 2009-10. Intensification of insurgency **manifested due to three main factors** - formation and consolidation of People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), formation of CPI (Maoist) after unification of two major Naxalite groups (People's War Group (PWG) and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC)) and the activities of Salwa Judum, an anti-Maoist vigilante group, banned by the Supreme Court in 2011.

<sup>1</sup> Vij, RK, 'The Dandakaranya Episode - breaking the Maoist stronghold', in *The Hindu Group e-book, 'Maoist in India - a movement in decline'*, 2025

Fatalities			
Year	Security Personnel	Insurgents	Remarks
2000	40	135	PLGA formed on 02 December 2000.
2001	116	169	Formation of CPI (Maoist) in 2004.
2002	115	163	Uptick in number of fatalities thereafter; insurgency intensifies with effect from the year 2005 (formation of Salwa Judum) and peaks around 2009-10 - attributed to strengthening and consolidation of PLGA.
2003	114	246	
2004	82	87	
2005	147	282	
2006	128	343	
2007	234	195	More number of security personnel killed than insurgents
2008	215	228	Marginal difference
2009	319	314	More number of security personnel killed than insurgents.
2010	267	260	Operation Green Hunt that was launched in 2009 was also a factor behind mounting casualties on both sides.
2011	137	210	
2012	96	125	
2013	91	151	
2014	98	121	Trend of decreasing fatalities of security forces and increase in that of the insurgents
2015	56	110	Launch of multi-pronged National Action Plan in 2015
2016	62	250	
2017	76	152	
2018	73	230	
2019	49	154	
2020	44	134	
2021	51	128	
2022	15	67	
2023	31	56	
2024	21	296	Maximum numbers of insurgents killed with a favourable kill ratio, i.e. minimum fatalities of security personnel
2025*	29	333	
* till 08 November 2025			
Fatalities Maoist Insurgency (Compiled by the author from the SATP data)			

The ultimate aim of Maoist insurgency has been the **armed overthrow of the Indian State**. The Marxist-Leninist ideologues have always believed in armed struggle to achieve political power - an aspect that is clearly enunciated in the founding documents of the CPI (Maoist).<sup>2</sup> The rise and consolidation of Maoist insurgency especially after formation of CPI (Maoist) in 2004 was on the basis of the military structure that the party possessed. The **dwindling military capability of Maoists, commencing from 2013-14** and

rapidly unfolding over the last two years, is the major reason for the present downfall of LWE in Central India.

### Past Rise of Maoist Combat Capabilities

The United Communist Party that led the Telangana struggle of 1946- 51, did not create a People's Army and was strongly criticised for this lapse. This shortcoming was rectified in the Naxalbari uprising of the 60s, where armed guerrilla squads were raised to lead the revolution. Thereafter, the military might of the Maoists grew into a sizeable force morphing into the PLGA.

The military structure of PLGA was a three-tier pyramid structure with a Main Force at the top (companies and platoons), a secondary force (guerrilla squads), and a base force (Peoples' Militia). The Peoples' Militia comprised local population who otherwise have a vocation in life and are imparted rudimentary military training.<sup>3</sup> The Militia members are generally armed with crude fabricated weapons, and **act as the eyes and ears of the Maoists**.<sup>4</sup>

Building up of Maoist combat capabilities was a function of acquisition of warlike stores like weapons, ammunition and explosives by the Maoists. The outfit **acquired such stores by three different modes - procurement, production and looting/snatching**. Several factors like the Afghanistan conflict, bloodbath of the infamous Khmer regime, the civil war in Sri Lanka, Pakistan instigated proxy wars, the ethnic insurgencies in Myanmar and other such local regional conflicts aided by the regional and global arms market contributed to a significant portion of weapons inventory of the Maoists.<sup>5</sup> Alongside, business transactions and nexus amongst the various non-state actors facilitated the arms trade of Maoists.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to procurement, a major portion of the Maoist arsenal was indigenous. Their ingenuity in the

2 "Strategy and Tactics of the Indian Revolution, Central Committee, CPI (Maoist)", Chapter 10, adopted on September 21, 2004 at founding of the party

3 Ramana PV, "India's Maoists: Profile and Thought Process" and "Understanding India's Maoists: Select Documents", IDS/A, 2014, Section 1, pp 2-4

4 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/plga-guerrilla-army-maoists-battalion-9818515/>; accessed on 28 October 25

5 Podder, Sukanya, 'The Politics of Gun Control and India's Internal Security', Strategic Analysis, Vol. 31, No. 4, July 2007

6 As cited in Gurmeet Kanwal's and Monika Chansoria's, 'Small Arms Proliferation in South Asia: A Major Challenge for National Security', Issue Brief, No. 18, May 2010, CLAWS



manufacture of weapons was noteworthy.<sup>7</sup> In 1994, Sadnala Ramkrishna **alias Techie Anna** set up a **Technical Development Committee** to coordinate the work of the production units, which was upgraded to a Central Technical Committee in July 2001, to work directly under the Maoist Central Military Commission. This unit was rechristened in 2005 as the Technical Research Arms Manufacturing Unit. It was mandated to not only manufacture and supply weaponry, but also acquire and develop skills and technology,<sup>8</sup> thereby reaping payoffs from the nexus that was developed over a period of time with other non-state actors.

In January 2007, the police in Bhopal **unearthed an arms-making cum design unit of Maoists and seized literature with detailed drawings of cross-sections of rocket launchers and other warlike stores.**<sup>9</sup> In September 2012, the NIA charge-sheeted **Techie Anna** and four others for waging war against the state and for illegal manufacture of arms and ammunition. The arrests preceding his charge-sheet resulted in seizure of 69 crates of weapons from a Raipur godown and some material from a workshop in Kolkata.

On the basis of **Techie Anna's** interrogation, the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) cracked the crucial links of how Maoists got their weapons - a supply chain thriving on make-do and improvisations. The strategy adopted

comprised snatching or looting a weapon from the security forces, field-stripping it, making diagrams of the parts, local manufacture of the parts using available resources, assembling a piece for testing, and eventually, passing on the know-how to production units.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to procuring and manufacturing, looting of weapons from police personnel, civilians and private companies has been a major source. The Maoists looted explosives from mining companies-a constant source for manufacturing Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). In February 2006, the **Maoists looted the Bailadila mining complex**, wherein they carried away 20 tons of explosives.<sup>11</sup> Besides minor incidents of looting and weapon snatching, the Maoists had carried out several audacious and synchronised large scale attacks on police armouries to gain huge amounts of war-like stores as booty. Major attacks were - the Koraput armoury raid (February 06, 2004), Giridih Home Guards armoury raid (November 11, 2005), Jehanabad jail break (November 13, 2005), Nayagarh

armoury raid (February 15, 2008) and Balimela attacks (June 29, 2008).

### Operations Against the Maoists

As brought out earlier, the downslide in Maoist insurgency began in 2013-14 mainly because the capabilities of the State and the security forces improved. The State's enhanced capacity in governance, to include policing and law enforcement, has been a result of **dogged political will to overcome the Maoist challenge.**

The current **police to population ratio in Bastar is more than 1100 security personnel to 100000 people.** This increased density includes central and state forces, and is a major improvement from the scenario about five to six years back. The seven districts of Bastar Division now have over 60000 security personnel - 40000 from CRPF, including six battalions of its elite CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action) commandos and 20000 from state police units.<sup>12</sup>



Security force personnel patrol after an attack by Maoist fighters in Bijapur in the central state of Chhattisgarh, India, April 4, 2021. (Photo REUTERS/Stringer)

7 Ramana PV, 'India's Maoists: Profile and Thought Process' and 'Understanding India's Maoists: Select Documents', IDS-A, 2014, Section 1, pp 2-4

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Deshpande, Varia, 'The DIY Maoist Manual', Outlook, September 2012

11 Miklian Jason, 'Fire in the Hole', Foreign Policy, August 06, 2010

12 Drolia, Rashmi, '4000 more CRPF troops deployed in Bastar for 'final blow' against Maoists', The Times of India, September 9, 2024



*Naxals training camp in Andhra Pradesh (Photo Anil kumar, hindustantimes.com)*

The inroads made by the Government into the remotest corners of erstwhile Maoist liberated zones have enabled security as well as delivery of administrative services. Approximately 250 new camps have been set up in Bastar since 2019.<sup>13</sup> The grid deployment of camps has facilitated quick reaction to any Maoist related violence in the affected regions. In addition, the **civil administration has made its presence felt in the pockets that were hitherto devoid of governance in the Maoist controlled territory.**

The proliferation of footprints of security forces, as per Sunderraj P, Inspector General, Bastar Range has not only resulted in successful tactical operations but also enabled the conduct of community policing by the state police. Credibility based outreach through community policing aims at influencing perceptions of the local population to cut through Maoist propaganda. The government is also utilising the camps to deliver its welfare programmes to remote regions. The Chhattisgarh government has been ramping up its response through

measures like 'Niyad Nellanar' or my ideal village scheme. Under the scheme, *Adivasis* are being enrolled for 52 schemes and 31 citizen services, with the resultant larger counter insurgency spin-off in winning hearts and minds of the local population.<sup>14</sup>

Tactical success gained by the security forces, especially over the last two years, has been due to factors like more focused and institutionalised preparations and training at the Jungle Warfare School, Kanker as also under region specific CoBRA units.<sup>15</sup> The security forces leadership is focused, exemplary and hands on, determined to wipe out Maoism from the country by March 2026. Security personnel are equipped with modern weapons and units are increasingly

employing advanced technologies for surveillance and analysis of Maoist activities. The use of cutting-edge technology, such as **advanced drones equipped with high-definition cameras and thermal imaging sensors**, has helped security forces monitor Maoist activity in the region's dense forests.<sup>16</sup>

Through location tracking, cell phone triangulation, advanced call logging and social media analysis, close monitoring of the Maoist movement is carried out.<sup>17</sup> Each Forward Operating Base (FOB) of the security forces is equipped with NETRA 3 and Bharat drones that have a range of five kms. Before embarking on an operation, the security forces use these unarmed aerial vehicles for surveillance, thereby minimising the likelihood of a Maoist ambush.<sup>18</sup> The **boost in TECHINT** has been **complemented by HUMINT**, due to fraternisation by the security forces and operational employment of local troopers of District Reserve Guard (DRG) and *Bastariya* Battalion. In addition to ambushes, during the peak years of insurgency the security forces suffered immense damage due to Maoist attacks on police stations. The government has invested in fortification of police outposts, thereby arresting the trend.<sup>19</sup> In the past decade, 612 fortified police stations have

13 Sharma, Ashutosh, 'Chhattisgarh claims it is winning against Naxals. But the victory comes at the cost of tribal lives and rights', *Frontline*, January 02, 2025

14 Chengappa, Raj and Noronha Rabul, 'Winning the War', *India Today*, March 17, 2025

15 Ibid

16 Putul, Alok, 'Warzone: Why Indian forces have launched a deadly assault on Maoists', *Al Jazeera*, May 22, 2025

17 Misra, Apoorva, 'How Intel, Drone Surveillance Helped Execute Mega Anti-Naxal Ops In Chhattisgarh', *Arunima, CNN-News18*, January 22, 2025

18 Ibid, 41

19 <https://www.mba.gov.in/en/divisionofmba/left-wing-extremism-division>; accessed on November 03, 2025



come up in the areas cleared of Maoists - demonstrative proof of the security forces domination.

Several weapon dumps and arms manufacturing facilities of the Maoists have been busted, in addition to weapon recoveries in successful tactical operations and surrenders. Since 2013-14, the major recoveries have been - West Singhbhum and Simdega (Jharkhand) in 2014, Malkangiri (Odisha) in 2015, Parvathipuram Manyam in (Andhra Pradesh), Koraput (Odisha), and at Chhattisgarh-Maharashtra Border in 2024. The hauls this year have increased considerably to include at Sukma (Chhattisgarh) in three incidents and one each at Malkangiri, Andhra-Odisha Border and Bijapur (Chhattisgarh). In May 2025, during an intensive 21 day operation in Karegutta hills on the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border, a major Maoist base including the **Technical Department (TD) Unit of the PLGA was destroyed**. The operations resulted in neutralisation of more than 30 armed cadres and recovery of 35 weapons (automatic, semi-automatic and country-made), 450 IEDs, 818 BGL shells, 899 bundles of Cordex, detonators, and large quantities of explosives.<sup>20</sup>

The PLGA has reportedly been facing a leadership crisis. The resignation of

**Muppala Lakshmana Rao, known as Ganapathy, in 2018 is considered to be the turning point.** He was succeeded by Basava Raju, who leaned heavily on military offensives rather than “*political outreach and civil engagement*”, alienating the support base. Basava Raju was killed in May 2025 and another ideologue, Venugopal, followed by Roopesh surrendered in October 2025, along with approximately 300 cadres with weapons. The outfit’s decision-making body (the Politburo), has now just three active members: Muppala Lakshmana Rao aka Ganapathy, Deo Kumar Singh alias Deoji, and Misir Besra. The Maoist leadership has accepted their losses and have exhorted the cadres to operate in small teams, to evade the onslaught of security forces.<sup>21</sup> The communication between the remaining Maoist cadres and the residual leadership today is completely broken with the outfit factionalised. Ideologically, the outfit is said to be losing its relevance with the younger peasants and tribals increasingly focused on education, employment, and

integration into mainstream society.<sup>22</sup> Maoist leaders have even discussed the option of stopping recruitment altogether.<sup>23</sup>

As far as the functioning of government’s security apparatus is concerned, there is an extremely high degree of synergy between the central and state forces, as also cooperation amongst the states abutting the DKR, where the counter Maoist movement has largely unfolded for the last few years. Under the overall coordination of the Ministry of Home Affairs, each operational success has had cascading effects eventually manifesting in the situation of today.<sup>24</sup>

**The morale of the security forces is riding high on the gains made.** The state governments are duly supported by the central government in meeting the expenditures. **Building of infrastructure, mainly in terms of construction of roads and installation of mobile communication network, has improved connectivity, which has**

20 Tripathy, Rabul, ‘31 Naxals killed in 21-day operation across Karregutta Hills’, *The Economic Times*, May 15, 2025

21 Henry, Nikhila, ‘Influence waning, Maoists told cadres before crackdown: ‘Weak, need to retreat’, *The Indian Express*, June 17, 2025

22 Pandey, Devesh, ‘Why Maoists are on the wane in the once-dreaded Red Corridor’, *The Hindu*, August 09, 2025

23 Srinivas, R, ‘Maoists minimise women recruitment in dalams’, *The Hindu*, August 08, 2017

24 Home Minister’s interview to *India Today* published in the edition dated March 17, 2025



Maoist Commander Madvi Hidma and his wife Madkam Raje were cremated on a single pyre at village Puvarti, Chhattisgarh, 20 November 2025 (Photo Statesman News Service)



*Representational Image. Security Forces patrolling in Maoist affected areas (photo ddnews.in)*

been the cornerstone of the positive developments in countering the Maoists. Deepening inroads to facilitate security and governance, and enhancing exposure of the tribal population to the outside world and weaning them away from Maoist influence, are the major spin offs from improved connectivity.

### Negative Aspects of the Maoist Movement

Having analysed the unravelling of Maoist insurgency, it is crucial to acknowledge that the story so far has mainly been in the realm of tangibles. **The shrinkage in their influence is mostly in terms of reduced cadre strength and combat capabilities, and to an extent diminishing traction of Maoist ideology.** The opportunity provided by the current decline of the insurgency needs to be consolidated through a **structured perception management campaign by the government, for enduring conflict resolution.** The Government has spelt out a holistic approach to deal with LWE. **The main pillars of the approach being:** security, development, ensuring rights and entitlements of local communities and improvement in governance and public perception management.<sup>25</sup> The pillar of perception management inter-alia needs to be accorded

sufficient emphasis. The original mandate of Maoists was for transformation of lives of the marginalised. With the ongoing cycle of violence between the State and the Maoists, the basic issues that Maoists claim to be fighting for, have got sidelined. As part of the enunciated perception management policy, the government needs to call out the flaws of revolutionary violence that the Maoists profess. **The Maoist facade of being involved in Adivasi welfare should be demystified.**

Maoism claims to be a movement for the people and hence the movement ought to be accountable to the people and their aspirations and be open to people's

scrutiny. Maoists, for their ulterior motives, have obstructed developmental activities, and kept the **areas of their influence in a state of backwardness.**<sup>26</sup>

One of the major practical implications is about violence as a means of struggle for change. A violent organisation has a structure and in the backdrop of violence, such organisations can never be democratic and inclusive. The illegal activities of the Maoists include punishments, killings for messaging and retribution. Consequently, the Maoist movement had inherent contradictions – camaraderie on one hand and deep suspicion and insecurity on the other.<sup>27</sup> Maoists who claim to be fighting for progressive values and rights, pronounce capital sentences in a '*jantana adalat*' (peoples' courts run by the Maoists) in a unilateral manner. Self-interests and personal grudges are some of the main causes behind labelling an individual a police informer and sentencing him to death.<sup>28</sup> Maoists believe in the argument of '*ends justifying the means*'. Ganapathi, the former General Secretary of CPI (Maoists) had stated in an interview in the year 2010, "*it is important to guard against getting bogged down in legalism and economism and forget that masses have to be prepared for seizure of power*".<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Press Information Bureau of India, 'Naxalmukt Bharat Abhiyan: From Red Zones to Growth Corridors - India's Decisive Battle Against Left Wing Extremism', April 10, 2025; <https://www.PressInformationBureauofIndia.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2120771>; accessed on May 11, 2025

<sup>27</sup> Bhatia, Bela, 'On Revolutionary Violence', 'India's forgotten country', Penguin Random House, 2024, pp 334

<sup>28</sup> Kumar, Mayank, 'Bastar tribal labeled 'informer', killed by Maoists after Independence Day celebration', *The Print*, August 22, 2025; <https://theprint.in/india/bastar-tribal-labeled-informer-killed-by-maoists-after-independence-day-celebration/2726489/>; accessed on August 22, 2025

<sup>29</sup> Navlakha, Gautam, 'Days and Nights in the Heart-land of Rebellion', *sanbati.com*; abridged version published in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 45, Issue No. 16, 17 Apr, 2010; <https://www.epw.in/journal/2010/16/insight/days-and-nights-maoist-heartland.html>; accessed on May 17, 2025



Maoists reject the enabling function of democracy that empowers people, thereby acting against peoples' empowerment. A transformative political movement is expected to practise what it preaches. Vis-a-vis the principle of equality, the Maoists have never scaled high on scrutiny. The intra-party dynamics of Maoists is about anything but equality as far as the position of *Adivasis* in the party is concerned. Within Maoist organisations, unfair treatment of *Adivasis* by upper caste leadership has been rampant. While *Adivasis* comprise the support base of Maoists, they are not adequately represented in the upper echelons of the party, and are led by minuscule numbers from the higher caste, mainly from Andhra Pradesh.<sup>30</sup>

Another downside of a weaponised culture manifesting due to Maoism, has been the misuse of power by the gun toting cadres. These personnel could be on either side of the divide - a Maoist or a District Reserve Guard from the state forces. As per Bela Bhatia, attraction of possessing a weapon has seen corrupt and unprincipled youth joining the Maoists. Since such developments take place at local levels, it is difficult for the party leadership to intervene and curb it in a non-inclusive organisational set up.<sup>31</sup>

Nirmalangshu Mukherji has critically analysed the achievement claims of Maoists

in the DKR, since their entry into the region in early 80s.<sup>32</sup> The essence of Mukherji's analysis is that, although the State may be blamed for neglecting the *Adivasis*, yet while being strong in the region for a substantial period of time, the Maoists have singularly focused on waging a guerrilla war in their bid to seize power. Maoists have used DKR as their safe haven owing to geographical and terrain advantages that the region offered and the pretence of *Adivasi* welfare was merely coincidental.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

To sum up, Maoists have survived due to the support they gained from the local population. Whether they are genuinely concerned for the tribal cause or have merely based their movement on pretensions is debatable. The Government has demonstrated political

will to wipe out the Maoist menace and at present there is a clear indication of managing the violence effectively. The time is opportune with receding footprints of Maoism which has been restricted to a few districts in the country. At present the *Adivasi* population, the centre of gravity in the conflict zone is ambivalent. If during the heydays of Maoism, the *Adivasis* were inclined to join the insurgents for the sake of gaining a voice, today they are convinced that the wherewithal for their long term welfare is with the government and not the Maoists.<sup>34</sup> The government should not let the opportunity slip away and consolidate the gains by addressing the structural issues at stake as also the mind-set of stakeholders by a long term perception management policy.



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<sup>30</sup> Ibid; Bhatia, pp 339

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, Bhatia

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# TECHNOLOGY AND THE NEW PARADIGM OF DETERRENCE

## IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

State vs State conventional conflicts are here to stay. The expectation that globalisation and an interconnected world will lead to more peaceful ways of settling inter-state disputes, has not been met. Our experience in the first two decades of the 21st century indicates that the **use of military force remains a viable 'go to' option in the quiver of Comprehensive National Power (CNP)** for protecting and furthering National Interests. While inter-state conflicts have reduced significantly in this century, they continue to be a high probability, especially in regions where disputed borders, historical fault lines and legacy differences persist.

### Backdrop

We live in a troubled neighbourhood with active borders to the West and to the North, and a history of past conflicts. In ensuring National Security and protecting our national interests and sovereignty, the need for a strong and capable military is sine qua non. Our military capability will ipso facto need to secure the country's land, sea, space borders and deter the threat of adversary's use of force. Therefore, any **force capability** must be premised on a **threat cum force application calculus**.

A clear eyed look at the **major conventional threats our Nation faces** on its borders indicates:-

- (a) A **hostile near-peer nuclear adversary on our Western Borders** with whom we have fought five wars and have unresolved active borders along with near number equivalence and near technology parity in battle systems.
- (b) To our North we have an **unfriendly nuclear power** with whom we have fought one war and multiple skirmishes, and share a long and disputed border dotted with historic conflict points. This security environment has been further



*An Iron Dome launcher launching a missile, Operation Guardian of the Walls, 13 May 2021 (Photo Israeli Defence Forces)*

vitiated by its new found assertiveness backed by greater numbers, distinct technology edge and growing indigenous military manufacturing base.

Thus, **our conventional threat environment can be summed up as - a near-peer overtly hostile nuclear adversary on the Western border, and a superior, coercive nuclear power on the Northern borders.**

### Shifting Paradigm of Conventional Conflicts

In the information age and the communication revolution that has underpinned it, technology has become an integral part of CNP, both, from an economic perspective as also in developing information age military capability. The singular overarching reach of **technology and intellectual property** that pervades every aspect of our lives today has possibly become a **main driver of a Nation's influence**, impacting both, its capability to create wealth and its effectiveness in waging war. Towards this end, precision, long range offensive systems like missiles, rockets, artillery guns



and drones are **providing militaries options in a conflict situation** that does not inevitably involve the use of troops or manned platforms to cross into adversary territory/airspace.

Traditional peer wars in the 20th century were organised around manoeuvre, massed formations and territorial seizure. However, in the current battlefield milieu, modern defences with **ubiquitous surveillance and battle field transparency** seem to be **exponentially raising the cost of combined arms manoeuvre**. The emergent pattern today is, what can be termed as a **mid-spectrum stand-off paradigm**, characterised by controlled effects delivered at ranges beyond conventional front-line and at tempos dominated by autonomous or semi-autonomous precision systems.

Combatants aim to inflict operationally relevant effects (sensor nodes, air defences, logistics hubs, command nodes) using missiles, rockets, artillery, loitering munitions and drones rather than attempting concentrated physical offensives into enemy depth. This approach **reduces the conventional utility of massed armour and sustained ground offensives** while placing a **premium on sensors, networked fire delivery, logistics survivability, and layered air and missile defences**.

Over the past half-decade, conflicts from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine and the wider Middle East have shown a **discernible shift from classic massed physical offensives between peer or near-peer adversaries**, toward limited engagements **dominated by stand-off fires**: long-range cruise and ballistic missiles, massed and precision guided loitering munitions and drones, and integrated effects using electronic warfare (EW), cyber and space assets. This has led to **two paradoxical outcomes** in recent years:-

- (a) The threshold of conflict has been lowered by technology in both asymmetric and near peer conflicts. In asymmetric conflicts, the Thucydides dictum of **“The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”** is followed. The **strong deliver punishment using vectors** without putting personnel or equipment at risk and the weak respond or act with the technology at their disposal. And in near peer conflicts, any escalation to the high end of the conflict spectrum invariably results in the perceived winner suffering as much as the loser, **when lacking decisive superiority**. Here **stand-off attacks satisfy the need and effectiveness of response** while **reducing the risk of escalation**.
- (b) Notwithstanding the above, while the **threshold of conflict has been lowered** due to the proliferation of stand-off weapon systems, new technologies have also made the war more lethal, which deters mass full

spectrum conflicts between two nation states. In recent conflicts, **technology and geopolitics geographically limit war aims between two peer/near peers**, and all parties prefer to seek to **contain the fighting** rather than climb the escalatory spectrum. In effect, warfare is now being conducted through **limited campaigns with the support of autonomous systems, long-range fires and sensor dominance**.

- (c) What has thus become evident in recent years is that, the **stand-off mode of waging contact war**, made easy by information age technology, is becoming the **preferred form of engagement** in both asymmetrical and near-peer conflicts.

### Why this Shift and Inferences for the Indian Subcontinent

Certain drivers possibly explain the move to mid spectrum



*Enhanced PINAKA rocket, developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) successfully flight-tested from Integrated Test Range, Chandipur, in Odisha on November 04, 2020 (Photo [www.pib.gov.in](http://www.pib.gov.in))*



Bengaluru made Sky Striker drone in flight (Credit [www.defencexp.com](http://www.defencexp.com))

stand-off engagements in State vs State conflicts:

(a) **Risk Aversion and Escalation Control.**

Peer states typically seek to achieve tactical and operational objectives while minimising the political risks and escalation of damage linked to deep, occupation style offensives. Long-range strikes and precision fires enable them to satisfy the need for response with a **lower risk of escalation**. Thus, States can pursue coercive objectives without committing large forces across borders, which is especially useful where escalation thresholds are sensitive.

(b) **Affordability and Proliferation of Capability.** The cost curve for effective stand-off weapons, small cruise missiles, loitering munitions and Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs) has fallen. Cheaper, mass producible attack drones and guided munitions allow state and non-state actors to field large salvos that complicate a defenders' air defence calculus.

(c) **Technology Convergence.** Improvements in Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance (ISR), targeting databases, secure data-links, autonomous navigation,

and precise last mile targeting enable distributed, networked fires to achieve high and visible effects on the battlefield, without **needing to close the distance**. EW and cyber provide force multipliers to disrupt enemy sensors and command networks, creating windows for stand-off attacks.

In the **Indian context**, use of force is likely to transit the path of **low spectrum border skirmishes to mid spectrum stand-off 'duels'** in the **contact domain**, at least in the near to mid-term for the following reasons:-

(a) On the Western borders, **neither country possesses a clear combat advantage to achieve effective 'compellence'**, providing no strong

justification for escalating the conflict to a high intensity, with its attendant destruction, casualties, and risk of prolonged stalemate. Moreover, the impetus for military response in the event of a sponsored proxy strike is partly shaped by domestic factors, which can be satisfactorily addressed through **visible stand-off strikes** employing advanced, information-age weapon systems. It also bears consideration that between near peer adversaries, the bigger country with greater endurance and capacity to absorb the costs of a limited conflict is able to **impose significant penalty on a weaker adversary through a continuum of multiple periodic stand-off engagements**, contributing to deterrence when viewed as a whole.

(b) On the Northern borders, while our Northern neighbour enjoys a clear multi-domain advantage, any high-intensity conventional conflict would result in significant losses in the high mountains and the maritime domain for both sides, without any reasonable assurance of achieving strategic objectives. Consequently, there is little military justification for either party to escalate the conflict. In this context, **hostilities are most likely to remain at the lower end of the conflict spectrum in the form of skirmishes, with any escalation confined primarily to limited stand-off exchanges.**

(c) Lastly, while recent events demonstrate that limited conventional conflict is possible even between nuclear-armed adversaries, **escalation to the high-intensity spectrum carries substantial deterrent risks and offers no clear strategic benefits.** These factors should serve to limit the escalatory spiral, keeping it within **controllable, mid-level thresholds.**



As being witnessed, the **mid spectrum becomes both a battlefield and a zone of persistent political coercion**, a low to medium intensity “*no hot war, no peace*” posture where **periodic stand-off strikes shape behaviour without declaring wars**. Advances in information age weaponry, such as cruise missiles, loitering munitions and drones, allow for **calibrated retaliation and signalling**. Modular, rapid-response stand-off capabilities enable leaders to scale strikes up or down, maintaining flexibility and avoiding commitment to costly ground mobilisations.

### How the Paradigm Has Worked in Recent Conflicts Across Shared Borders

**Nagorno-Karabakh (2020) and the TB2 Effect.** Azerbaijan’s 2020 campaign demonstrated how relatively low-cost, armed tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) (notably the Turkish Bayraktar TB2) can impose disproportionate effects on adversary combined arms units, air defences, and artillery when integrated into a comprehensive fire plan. The TB2’s role in spotting, targeting and delivering guided micro-munitions helped disable enemy air defence systems and armour at stand-off ranges, collapsing defensive belts without mass ground advances typical of earlier eras. This was a pivotal early demonstration that drones could shape operational outcomes in a short, sharp campaign.

**Russia–Ukraine (2022–2025) and Drone saturation, Layered Effects and Cruise Missiles.** The Ukraine war has become the most vivid laboratory of mid spectrum warfare. Two features stand out:

(a) **Drone and Loitering Munitions Saturation.** Russia’s large-scale use of Iranian origin Shahed series attack drones and indigenously produced

variants illustrated how massed low cost loitering munitions can be used to wear down air defences, disrupt logistics and attack infrastructure. Over 2024-2025 Russian Shahed campaigns produced waves of launches in intensive episodes, forcing Ukraine to reconfigure defensive priorities and resilience measures. In turn, innovative use of First Person View (FPV) drones, at scale, by Ukraine has converted defensive lines into static ‘*no move*’ zones, while completely negating concentration and manoeuvre of mechanised forces.

(b) **Long Range Precision Fires for Operational Reach.** Western supplied long-range cruise missiles like the Storm Shadow and US long range artillery and rocket effects changed the depth at which targets could be held at risk. Kyiv’s limited authority to strike into Russian territory with long-range munitions (and its actual use) underlines how stand-off weapons extend battlefield geometry beyond front line contact.

(c) Combined, massed loitering munitions and precision long-range strikes has forced both sides to invest heavily in **layered air defence, EW, mobile dispersal, and passive hardening**, classic adaptations to a stand-off environment.

**Operation Sindoor: India-Pakistan (2025).** The India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025, exemplified by **Operation Sindoor**, powerfully illustrates the emerging paradigm amongst near-peer adversaries; **a clear preference for stand-off exchanges over large scale close combat**. Both sides employed advanced precision munitions, drones, cruise missiles and layered air defence systems, conducting strikes against key

selected objectives, while deliberately avoiding a broader ground offensive. In essence, this was in a similar vein as the stand-off exchanges post the terrorist strike in Pulwama in 2019.

**The Middle East and the Asymmetric Dynamic (2023-25).** The October 2023 Hamas assault and subsequent operations showcased **two central dynamics**. First, **inexpensive rocket and drone salvos continue to be used for area effects and attrition**, pressuring urban infrastructures. Second, Israel’s reliance on layered missile defence systems (Iron Dome, David’s Sling, Arrow), paired with deep-strike stand-off options, shows an asymmetric interplay of massed low cost attacks vs expensive layered defence and selective long-range counter-strikes. The 2024-25 period also showed how regional actors like the Houthis project stand-off effects beyond immediate borders via drones and missiles, blurring geographic thresholds for conflict.

### Implications for India: Security, Doctrine and Procurement

India faces a uniquely complex neighbourhood; two nuclear-armed peers on different flanks; increasing great power competition in the Indian Ocean; and non-state threats. The stand-off paradigm therefore has profound implications across deterrence, force posture, industrial base and doctrine.

**Deterrence: Integrating Conventional and New Technology Domains.** As identified, if conflict is most likely to manifest in the **low to mid level** of the conflict spectrum, the following appears axiomatic:-

(a) Large quantum combined arms forces predicated on mechanised

formations with legacy capability, integrated with new age technologies and adapted structures, will remain a **potent ‘threat in being’ to deter** motivation for any adversary to escalate to the high end of the conflict spectrum. But, if operational manoeuvre is unlikely to be the primary resort in the use of force, tactical dominance of the battle space becomes critical, for which:

- **Advantage in drones and robotic systems, and long range indirect fires capability** would form the backbone of the ‘Shooter’ ecosystem, for inflicting deterrent effect on adversary forces. In the unmanned platforms domain, **scalability and affordability** will be critical in massing effect.
- **Layered and networked air defence architecture** will be needed to mitigate impact of similar capabilities with the enemy.
- **Dominating the electromagnetic spectrum** ensuring sensor superiority for battlefield transparency and robust networks for data transmission will provide the ‘information’ necessary for denial of surprise and precision targeting.
- **Embedding of Artificial Intelligence (AI)** for sensor data fusion and decision support systems would be necessary for rapid orientation, decision making and decisive action.

(b) Thus, Indian deterrence calculus must expand beyond nuclear signals and large conventional formations to include:

- **Demonstrated resilient capacity to absorb and respond** to massed stand-off attacks by hardening critical infrastructure, having reserve stockpiles, rapid command & control recovery and civil-military coordination. At the tactical level, a robust and effective Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) network with sustainable cost per kill becomes essential to retain freedom of operational and logistic

movement in a drone dominated non-linear battle space.

- **Credible counter-strike options at operational depth** to include land, air and sea based cruise and anti-ship missiles, air launched stand-off munitions, and long range UAS that can impose costs on adversary critical points.

**Warfighting Systems.** The following war fighting categories will need to be bolstered for effective tactical overmatch in the low to mid spectrum of conventional conflict:

(a) **Attack Systems.**

- **Loitering Munitions and Kamikaze Drones.** Cheap to produce and often expendable, these can be massed in salvos to overwhelm point defences and create denial. Affordable scalability will decide tactical superiority.
- **Tactical Armed UAVs.** Systems like TB2 demonstrated that medium endurance UCAVs with guided munitions can serve both ISR and strike roles effectively.
- **Stand-off Cruise and Ballistic Missiles.** Weapon systems such as Storm Shadow and indigenous cruise missiles of the BrahMos class provide mission planners with options to deliver precision effects from well beyond the frontline at operational depth.
- **155 mm Howitzers and Multiple Launch Rocket Systems.** Precision guidance kits and sensor fused munitions add value to traditional artillery and provide capability to inflict significant damage, deter movement and shape the battle space in the tactical domain.

(b) **Enablers:** C4ISR, autonomy and production.

- **Persistent ISR and Targeting.** Space and airborne sensors providing sensor dominance and sensor data fusion produce the target tracks needed for engagement.
- **AI.** AI in navigation, target recognition, decision support, last mile targeting and swarm algorithms allow precise and coordinated hits, as also complicate defence prioritisation.
- **Mass Production and Supply Chains.** The ability to produce hundreds or thousands of inexpensive systems (engines, sensors, warheads) changes strategic calculus: quantity can be a form of qualitative advantage.

(c) **Countermeasures.**

- **Layered Air and Missile Defences.** Point, short-range and mid-range interceptors combined with soft-kill measures (jamming, spoofing) form the backbone of defence. Against drones and drone swarms, effectiveness and cost per kill will dictate the defensive architecture.



- **EW and Cyber.** EW can blind, confuse or seize control of networked UAS while impacting effective use of the electromagnetic spectrum to the adversary; cyber effects can disrupt targeting chains.
- **Resilience and Dispersal.** Hardened, dispersed logistics and redundancy (alternate supply nodes, mobile command and control) blunt the operational effect of a successful stand-off strike.

**Risks and Limits of the Stand Off Paradigm.** There are risks and limits to a stand-off campaign executed multiple times as a stated response strategy:

- **Escalation Unpredictability.** Precision and perceived 'just cause' do not eliminate escalation risk. Cumulative strikes on infrastructure can force disproportionate responses, especially when the scope of targeting increases with each response.
- **Defence Improvements will erode Advantage over Time.** As layered air defences, EW, and counter UAS/missile systems improve, the operational cost of massed indirect strikes rises.
- **Civilian Harm and Political Blowback.** Attacks on adversary hinterland can trigger international backlash, diminishing the political utility of stand-off campaigns.

Thus, while mid-spectrum standoff gives tempting operational options, it must be paired with **strict political-strategic judgement and calibrated escalation management.**

### Conclusion

The mid spectrum stand-off paradigm is not simply a technological trend; it **restructures the political and military contest between peers and near-peers.**

Recent conflicts have demonstrated that affordable drones, loitering munitions, and stand-off missiles can impose operational effects previously achievable only with large, conventional campaigns. For the Indian Army, the implications are profound; **deterrence now depends as much on resilience, industrial surge capacity, and integrated ISR as on mechanised forces heavy formations.**

The Army's path should be pragmatic, **investing in layered defence, expanding indigenous stand-off strike options, building robust counter UAS and anti-missile systems,** and rewriting doctrine to operate in an environment where the first meaningful blows may come from hundreds of kilometres away, delivered by machines.

The good news is that much of what is required is within our reach, namely, a vibrant defence industry, an active Research & Development base (DRDO, private sector), and a political willingness to invest in both hard and soft resilience. **The harder tasks are institutional;** joint doctrine reform, legal diplomatic playbooks for ambiguous coercion, and cultural adaptation to distributed operations. If we get these right, it can shape the mid spectrum era of stand-off warfare.

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**Major General  
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# DIGITAL TERRAIN CONTROL AND DATA SOVEREIGNTY

## THE CONVERGENT FRONTIERS OF MODERN MILITARY CONFLICT

Effective control of the digital terrain is inextricably linked with maintaining data sovereignty and this convergence creates both vulnerabilities and opportunities that modern military forces must address to maintain operational effectiveness. There is a need to explore this convergence through multiple dimensions, examining both the technical military requirements for digital terrain control and the governance frameworks necessary for data sovereignty. This article proposes an integrated approach for military forces to address identified challenges in a systematic and strategic manner.

### Introduction

The character of modern warfare has undergone a fundamental transformation with the digitalisation of battle space. The **Digital Terrain** is a complex matrix of hardware, software, network infrastructure (cables, satellites, servers) and the flow of data that underpins modern society and military command. Unlike physical geography, the Digital Terrain is **omnipresent, non-contiguous** and **constantly contested**. It facilitates and enables military functions and capabilities such as command, control, communications, intelligence, navigation and precision strike capabilities. Loss of control of digital terrain translates directly to a loss of operational effectiveness, making it a **critical domain** alongside land, sea, air and space. In conflict, controlling the digital terrain means controlling the ability to command, communicate, navigate and strike. Concurrently, the concept of **data sovereignty** has emerged as a critical strategic concern, referring to a state's authority to control data within its territory and ensure that its digital assets remain subject to national laws and security protocols. Data sovereignty is a legal and political assertion of **exclusive national jurisdiction** over data. This is often operationalized



Telecommunications equipment in one corner of a small data centre, 12 January 2004 (Photo Gregory Maxwell, commons.wikimedia.org)

through **data localisation** requirements, demanding that infrastructure and data storage remain physically within **national borders**. While framed as protection against foreign surveillance and exploitation, the practical effect is to create digital borders within the global network.

### Digital Terrain as a Warfighting Domain

**Digital Terrain's Components.** The digital terrain encompasses physical infrastructure, logical networks and data ecosystems that enable modern military operations. Unlike traditional domains, it exists both as a parallel dimension to physical terrain and integrated within it through critical infrastructure. Physical components include fibre optic cables, data centres, satellite networks, and telecommunications infrastructure that form the backbone of military and civilian communications. Logical components comprise the protocols, algorithms, and software systems that govern data flow and processing, while the data layer consists of the actual information payloads that enable situational awareness, targeting, and command decisions while Cyber-



Persona layer consists of personal identities. (See Figure below - Layers of digital terrain<sup>1</sup>) This digital terrain has become so fundamental to military operations that it now constitutes what some analysts term **"strategic domain"**. The significance of this domain was vividly demonstrated when *"the Russian military invaded the Ukrainian city of Kherson in the spring of 2022, it quickly moved to control local internet access"*.<sup>2</sup>

**Military Applications and Dependencies.** Modern military operations have developed critical dependencies on digital terrain across all functional areas. Several key applications demonstrate this reliance:

- **Precision Navigation and Timing (PNT):** Systems like the TERPROM digital terrain system used in military aircraft provide *"accurate, drift-free Terrain Reference Navigation (TRN) solution, situational awareness functionality, and air-to-ground ranging capabilities"* without reliance on GNSS, which is crucial in GNSS-denied environments<sup>3</sup>. These systems enable aircraft to navigate accurately even when

traditional navigation systems are compromised or jammed.

- **Command and Control:** Digital networks enable decentralised operations that characterise modern military effectiveness. The capability-vulnerability paradox noted by the Centre for a New American Security observes that *"digitally enabled warfare allows states to project power over great distances, at condensed time ranges, and with great precision and lethality"*.<sup>4</sup>

- **Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance:** Digitisation of battlespace has created unprecedented capabilities for situational awareness. As commercial satellite imagery reaches resolutions down to 30 centimetres and becomes more accessible, the digital terrain enables *"ever more probing eyes in the sky"* that make it increasingly difficult for governments to conceal assets or disguise troop movements.

### Data Sovereignty as a Strategic Imperative Conceptual Framework. Data

sovereignty represents a state's authority and control over data generated within its territory, encompassing the legal and technical mechanisms that enable governance of data access, storage and usage. In military contexts, this concept extends to **"digital sovereign control of data and AI-based models for military cyber security"**. The strategic imperative of data sovereignty stems from data's role as *"the strategic resource of the information age"* that *"influences everything from national security to individual privacy"*.<sup>5</sup>

The concept has evolved beyond mere **data localisation** to encompass meaningful control throughout the data lifecycle. As defined in recent research, *"data sovereignty directly refers to meaningful control, ownership, and stewardship of data, often expressed by various stakeholders across contexts including legislation, ICT architecture, and societal advocacy. This comprehensive view recognises that physical data storage location alone is insufficient without actual control over access and usage"*.<sup>6</sup>

1 Layers of digital cyberspace [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Three-Interrelated-Layers-of-Cyberspace3\\_fig1\\_334678269](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Three-Interrelated-Layers-of-Cyberspace3_fig1_334678269)

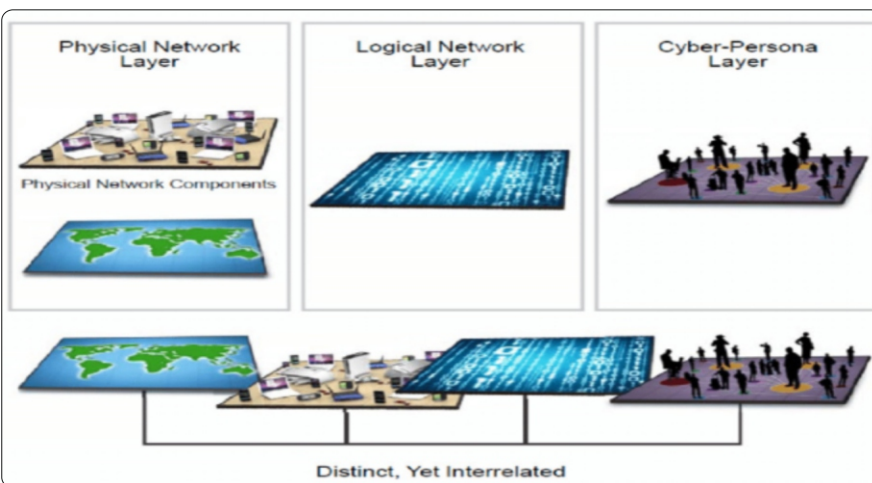
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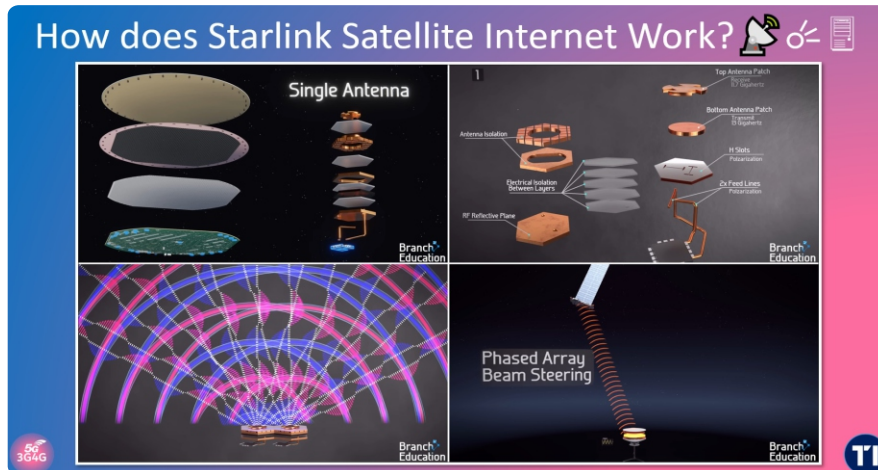
4 Digitally Enabled Warfare - Capability-Vulnerability Paradox. Center for a New American Security. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/digitally-enabled-warfare-the-capability-vulnerability-paradox>

5 Digital Sovereignty Control Framework for Military AI-based Cyber Security.

6 <https://arxiv.org/html/2509.13072v1>  
The Data Sovereignty Debate <https://www.architis.com/the-data-sovereignty-debate-beats-up/>



Layers of digital terrain



Decoding starlink technology, 14 January 2025 (Credit [www.telecomsinfrastructure.com](http://www.telecomsinfrastructure.com))

**Regulatory and Jurisdictional Challenges.** The transnational nature of digital infrastructure creates complex jurisdictional challenges for data sovereignty during conflicts. The application of laws such as the US CLOUD Act demonstrates how "US regulations permit authorities, under specific circumstances, to obtain data transmitted through services created or managed by US companies, regardless of where the data is physically stored".<sup>7</sup>

Traditional concepts of territorial jurisdiction are ill-suited for the digital age, where data can reside on servers located in multiple countries simultaneously. This jurisdictional ambiguity creates gaps in protection of civilian data and challenges for military forces seeking to maintain control of conflict-related information.

**Data Sovereignty in Conflict Scenarios.** In active conflicts, data sovereignty becomes a strategic requirement rather than merely a legal concern. Several conflict scenarios demonstrate this imperative:

- **Control of Civilian Data:** During the Russian occupation of Kherson, control of local internet access enabled "censorship and surveillance technology". This example illustrates

how data sovereignty violations can facilitate population control and enable broader military objectives.

- **Platform Dependency Vulnerabilities:** The concentration of cloud services with US providers creates potential vulnerabilities where "any information stored on or utilised through Microsoft's or other cloud-based products associated with a US-based organisation could be subject to a subpoena from the United States authorities".

## Convergence of Digital Terrain Control and Data Sovereignty

### The Symbiotic Relationship.

Control of digital terrain and maintenance of data sovereignty share a symbiotic relationship in modern conflict. Control of physical digital infrastructure enables data sovereignty, while data sovereignty ensures that the information flowing through that infrastructure remains secure and under national control. This relationship creates what can be termed **sovereign digital terrain – infrastructure and data ecosystems that remain under national control even during conflicts**. This convergence is particularly evident in what humanitarian organisations have identified as "digital risks" in armed conflict. These risks emerge when control of digital terrain and data sovereignty are compromised, leading to harm including "disruption of people's connectivity," "cyber operations against civilian infrastructure," and "data misuse and mishandling". The humanitarian consequences demonstrate why this convergence **matters not just for military effectiveness but for civilian protection and compliance with international humanitarian law**.<sup>8</sup>

**Case Studies in Convergence.** Several recent conflicts demonstrate the convergence in practice between digital terrain control and data sovereignty:

- **Myanmar (2021):** The military's seizure of data centres preceding their public announcement of a coup demonstrates how control of digital terrain enables broader control. "In the night preceding the coup, armed officers reportedly raided the data centres of internet providers. A couple of hours

7. The Data Sovereignty Debate <https://www.architis.com/the-data-sovereignty-debate-beats-up/Digital-Battlegrounds:Data-Sovereignty-and-Regulatory-Challenges-in-Armed-Conflicts>. *Global Journal of Engineering, Design & Technology*. <https://www.longdom.org/articles/digital-battlegrounds-data-sovereignty-and-regulatory-challenges-in-armed-conflicts-1102448.html>  
8. Understanding digital risks in armed conflict. International Committee of the Red Cross.



later, the first connectivity disruptions were felt across the country"<sup>9</sup>. This example shows the **tactical sequencing of digital terrain control as a precursor to broader power projection**.

- **Ethiopia (2020):** The government's shutdown of internet access in Tigray region concurrent with military operations illustrates the operational integration of digital terrain control with military objectives. *"Because the Ethiopian government remains in de facto control of the country's digital infrastructure, it was able to order and implement the internet shutdown to coincide with the start of its military offensive on the region"*<sup>10</sup>. This control **provided operational advantages while limiting external monitoring of the conflict**.

- **Ukraine (2022-present):** The conflict has featured extensive cyber operations alongside conventional warfare, demonstrating the integration of digital terrain control with military operations. Research notes that *"the ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted the important role of cyber operations in modern warfare, demonstrating the need for resilient and adaptable control frameworks"*<sup>11</sup>. The conflict has also seen the **strategic use of commercial satellite imagery and Starlink communications systems**, highlighting the blurred boundaries between commercial and military digital terrain.

**Emerging Technologies and Future Battlefields.** The convergence of digital terrain control and data sovereignty is accelerating with emerging technologies that will define future battlefields:

- **Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning:** The development of AI-based military systems risks systematically devaluing human judgment and transferring discretionary power to non-human agents. This creates new data sovereignty challenges around training data, algorithmic transparency and decision accountability.

- **Commercial Space Infrastructure:** With approximately 60% of the US satellites in orbit being commercial, military forces face both opportunities and challenges in leveraging capabilities they do not directly control. This creates sovereignty gaps where commercial entities effectively control critical military infrastructure.

- **Autonomous Systems:** The proliferation of drones and other autonomous systems creates new requirements for data sovereignty throughout the kill chain. As noted in analysis of the war in Ukraine, *"low-tech commercial drones have played an increasingly dominant role"*, demonstrating how commercially available systems are changing the digital terrain of the battlefield.

### A Framework for Integrating Digital Terrain Control with Data Sovereignty

**Foundational Principles.** Military forces seeking to address the convergence of digital terrain control and data sovereignty should adopt foundational principles that allow capability development and operational planning:

- **Resilience Over Invulnerability:** Recognising that complete protection of digital terrain is impossible, focus instead on resilient architectures that can

maintain essential functions even when compromised. This includes maintaining analog fallbacks for critical functions to avoid complete digital dependency.

- **Sovereignty by Design:** Integrating data sovereignty requirements throughout system development and acquisition processes. This includes implementing technical controls such as *"Customer-Provided Keys (CPK) managed off-cloud"* to ensure data remains under national control regardless of platform ownership.<sup>12</sup>

- **Proportional Dependency:** Carefully evaluating dependencies on commercial systems and foreign technologies to avoid critical vulnerabilities. This principle acknowledges that some dependency is unavoidable but should be managed to maintain operational sovereignty.

**Technical Implementation Framework.** Implementing integrated digital terrain control and data sovereignty requires a layered technical approach:

- **Infrastructure Layer:** Ensure physical control or assured access to critical digital infrastructure, including redundant communications pathways and sovereign data centres. This may include developing indigenous capabilities for critical infrastructure components.

<sup>9</sup> Myanmar Military Blocks Internet During Coup <https://www.brm.org/news/2021/02/02/myanmar-military-blocks-internet-during-coup>

<sup>10</sup> Ethiopian government restricted telephone and internet services to the troubled Tigray region <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/en/shutdowns/gradual-internet-disruptions/>

<sup>11</sup> Digital Sovereignty Control Framework for Military AI-based Cyber Security: Clara Maathuis, Kasper Cools <https://arxiv.org/html/2509.13072v1>

<sup>12</sup> Cloud Data Sovereignty Governance <https://www.isaca.org/resources/news-and-trends/industry-news/2024/cloud-data-sovereignty-governance-and-risk-implications-of-cross-border-cloud-storage>

- **Data Layer:** Implement comprehensive data protection through encryption, access controls and sovereign key management. As recommended in technical guidance, encrypting data in transit, at rest, and in processing, using controls that remain under national authority. Use of quantum resistant cryptography would be essential in military grade communications.

- **Identity and Access Layer:** Deploy 'role and attribute' based access controls to restrict access to data and services that can enforce data sovereignty policies regardless of physical location. These controls should be dynamic and context-aware to adapt to changing threat conditions.

- **Application Layer:** Ensure that military applications are designed to operate effectively in contested digital environments with limited connectivity. This includes the development of digital terrain systems that can maintain navigation and targeting capabilities without external dependencies.

**Organization and Doctrine Integration.** Beyond technical solutions, effective integration requires organisational adaptation and doctrinal evolution:

- **Digital Terrain Mapping:** Military forces should develop comprehensive mapping of their digital terrain dependencies, identifying single points of failure and sovereignty gaps that could be exploited by adversaries. This mapping should inform both acquisition decisions and operational planning.

- **Sovereignty-Centric Training:** Training programmes should incorporate data sovereignty principles and digital terrain awareness across all ranks and specialities. Trust in the system through experience is essential for effective utilisation of digital systems.

- **Legal and Ethical Integration:** Ensure that legal frameworks and rules of engagement adequately address the convergence of digital terrain control and data sovereignty. This includes developing protective frameworks and dialogue that establish appropriate limits on military operations in the digital terrain.

## Conclusion

The convergence of digital terrain control and data sovereignty represents one of the most significant

developments in modern warfare. As military operations become increasingly dependent on digital systems and data flows, the ability to control this terrain while maintaining sovereignty over critical information has become a decisive factor in conflict outcomes. These two concepts are intrinsically linked – control of digital terrain enables data sovereignty, while data sovereignty ensures that the advantages gained through digital terrain control are not undermined by external dependencies or vulnerabilities.

The strategic implications of this convergence are profound. **Military forces must re-evaluate their dependencies on commercial systems and foreign technologies, develop new capabilities for operating in contested digital environments, and integrate sovereignty considerations throughout their doctrine and acquisition processes.** The technical solutions exist – through encryption, access controls and resilient architectures – but must be implemented within a broader strategic framework that recognises the intrinsic connection between physical control of infrastructure and legal control of data.

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Top. Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief, Atlantic Fleet, and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox: On board USS Augusta (CA-31), during the Secretary's visit to Bermuda in September 1941.

Centre. Secretary of the Navy Knox (right centre) confers with Admiral James O. Richardson (right), Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet, in Washington, D.C. on 10 October 1940.

Bottom. Admiral J.O. Richardson, USN, CINCUS with Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox aboard USS ENTERPRISE (CV-6) just before the take off for Pearl Harbour, September 1940.

(All photos courtesy U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

# ROOSEVELT AND HIS FLEET COMMANDERS

## EFFECTIVE STRATEGY THROUGH DISCIPLINED CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS

Effective strategy requires bridging the gap between civilian authority and military decision making. This is especially true in democratic nations, where civilian authority is enshrined in law. However, the relationship between civilian leaders and senior military officers is seldom simple or straightforward, but the relationship is vital because it influences the development and conduct of strategy. Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz highlighted this with his frequently quoted declaration that **"war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means."** If we accept Clausewitz's perspective, then effective strategy emerges through a collaborative effort involving civilian and military leaders. This discourse discusses the interactions, decision making and execution of strategy by President Roosevelt and his Fleet Commanders.

### Introduction

In the two years before the 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his senior Admirals collaborated to devise a strategy that aligned with his goals. It was a difficult challenge. Roosevelt wanted to support the European democracies in their fight against Nazi Germany but he was constrained by American public opinion, which wanted to avoid war. That factor was foremost in his mind as he sought re-election for an unprecedented third term in 1940. Roosevelt's challenge was further complicated by the Empire of Japan, which had initiated a war with China in July 1937. Roosevelt feared that Japan would use the war in Europe as an excuse to seize French, Dutch and British colonies in Asia. Roosevelt's strategy had to account for this, and he felt the U.S. Fleet could be a powerful deterrent.

To achieve his goals of deterring Japan and supporting the European democracies, Roosevelt employed an emergent strategy, one that did not adhere to a predefined plan, but instead reacted to events while simultaneously trying to shape them. Implementing that strategy required a particular type of



*Atlantic Charter Conference, 10-12 August 1941 on the after deck of HMS Prince of Wales, in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (left) and Prime Minister Winston Churchill are seated. Standing behind them are Admiral Ernest J. King, USN; General George C. Marshall, U.S. Army; General Sir John Dill, British Army; Admiral Harold R. Stark, USN; and Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, RN (Photo U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)*

military commander, one who could accept the frequent adjustments necessitated by political uncertainty while simultaneously translating Roosevelt's policy desires into operational direction.

Not all officers were up to this challenge. Roosevelt's interaction with three senior naval officers, Admiral James O. Richardson, who held the post of Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet (CINCUS), Admiral Harold R. Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), and Admiral Ernest J. King, who became Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet (CINCLANT), illustrated the difficulty. An examination of these interactions reinforces the importance of skilfully bridging the gap between civilian authority and military decision making to devise and execute national strategy.

### Richardson and the Hawaiian Base

Admiral Richardson became CINCUS in January 1940. Given the tense international situation, he felt his primary focus ought to be preparing for war, which could best be done from U.S. West Coast bases. However, on 7 May 1940, Admiral

Stark ordered Richardson to keep the Fleet in Hawaii after a large exercise. Richardson was concerned. He felt remaining in Hawaii would make it more difficult to train and prepare for war. He asked Stark how long the Fleet was likely to remain. On 15 May, Stark informed him that the fleet would "remain [in] Hawaiian waters for some time."

President Roosevelt had decided to base the Fleet in Hawaii to deter Imperial Japan. This was a political decision. He feared that the German invasion of Belgium, the Netherlands, and France would prompt Japan to capture European colonies in Asia. By keeping the Fleet in Hawaii, Roosevelt hoped to show Japan that the United States was ready to move

aggressively to defend U.S. and European interests in the Western Pacific. Stark explained this rationale on 27 May, telling Richardson that his Fleet was in Hawaii "because of the deterrent effect... your presence may have on the Japanese."

Richardson and Roosevelt had fundamentally different perspectives. Richardson felt the nation's "paramount interest" was "the security of the Western Hemisphere." He was not alone; military planners in Washington were developing isolationist hemispheric defence plans. Roosevelt, in contrast, believed the defence of the United States had to extend beyond the hemisphere's boundaries. As 1940 went on, Roosevelt became convinced that the survival of Great Britain was a core U.S. interest. However, he had to tread carefully; he would not win re-election unless he respected the strong isolationist sentiment among the voting public. Democratic candidate Roosevelt tried to balance his interventionist sensibilities against public opinion by making Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War and Frank Knox, Secretary of the Navy. Both were prominent Republicans who supported Roosevelt's views on preparedness and international intervention.

In a series of meetings over the latter half of 1940, Richardson argued unsuccessfully for his perspective. In July 1940, Richardson met Roosevelt in Washington and tried to convince the President to withdraw the Fleet to the West Coast. Roosevelt was not convinced. In September 1940, Secretary Knox visited the Fleet in Hawaii. Knox explained the administration's policies to Richardson, including the importance of keeping Great Britain in the war while simultaneously deterring Japan. Richardson was still not convinced. He continued to argue the Fleet should return to its West Coast bases. In a lengthy memorandum, Richardson questioned the administration's policies and argued there

was insufficient “*cooperation between the State, War, and Navy Departments.*” In this time, before the creation of the U.S. Department of Defense, those three departments were most responsible for foreign policy. Richardson gave the memorandum to Knox and sent copies to Admiral Stark and a friend at the State Department.

Richardson failed to realize that the nation’s civilian leadership largely agreed with Roosevelt’s approach. He and his cabinet recognized that Japan had to be deterred, and Great Britain supported. However, they continued to approach these policies cautiously because of the upcoming election. In October, Richardson returned to Washington. He lunched with Roosevelt on the 7th. The President reiterated his stance that the Fleet would remain in Hawaii to restrain Japan. Richardson responded by questioning Roosevelt’s ability to lead. Richardson contended that “*senior officers of the Navy do not have the trust and confidence in the civilian leadership of this country.*” Richardson’s frank admission that he had lost faith in the President’s leadership shocked Roosevelt. In effect, the Admiral was arguing that he had a better grasp of political decisions—what was best for the nation—than the President. This inverted the appropriate relationship between civilian and military leaders in the U.S. democratic system.

### **Stark and “Plan Dog”**

Roosevelt’s approach was vindicated by his clear victory in the 1940 election. In its aftermath, Stark formulated a strategy reflecting the President’s policy priorities. Stark’s “*Plan Dog*” memorandum presented four options for the United States in the event of war: a withdrawal into the Western Hemisphere, a “*full offensive against Japan,*” a simultaneous effort in both Europe and the Pacific, and a “*strong offensive in the Atlantic*” coupled with defence in the Pacific. Stark examined each alternative in turn and

argued that only the last one—option “*d*” or “*dog*” in the Navy’s phonetic alphabet—would achieve Roosevelt’s policy goals. Knox and Roosevelt welcomed Stark’s assessment. His memorandum became the basis for the “*National Defense Policy of the United States*” issued in December 1940. That policy prioritized the threat of Nazi Germany and assistance to Great Britain.

To oversee operations in the Atlantic, Roosevelt, Knox, and Stark selected Rear Admiral Ernest J. King, who was appointed Commander of the Navy’s Atlantic Squadron on 17 December 1940. The following January, Roosevelt reconfigured the Navy’s high command. Admiral Richardson had overplayed his hand, and Roosevelt relieved him. In his place, Admiral Husband E. Kimmel was appointed CINCUS, with a dual responsibility as Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC). The Atlantic Squadron was renamed the Atlantic Fleet and King became CINCLANT with the rank of full Admiral.

### **King as CINCLANT**

King’s approach to Roosevelt’s policy direction was very different from Richardson. Where Richardson felt an obligation to challenge civilian authority in the best interests of the nation, King recognized that his authority derived from his civilian superiors. Consequently, King acted as a faithful agent of policy. When the Atlantic Fleet’s weaknesses in training and preparation became evident, King accepted it and issued a fleet-wide memorandum that challenged his officers to “*do all that we can with what we have.*” That was a challenge as the Fleet faced a lack of trained personnel, inadequate material, and a high

operational tempo. However, King encouraged his subordinates to face these difficulties with a positive spirit. Civilian leaders welcomed this approach. After reviewing King’s memorandum, Knox expressed his agreement: “*To make the best of what we have is, of course, the only philosophy for us to pursue.*”

However, as Roosevelt adjusted his policies to the developing situation, it was difficult to craft a clear strategy. The overarching challenge was how best to safeguard the convoys that sustained the British war effort. From 29 January to 27 March 1941, military leaders of the United States and Great Britain met in Washington. These meetings built on the U.S. National Defense Policy and concluded that Europe was “*the decisive theatre*” and that the North Atlantic convoys were vital. Stark felt the United States would soon enter the war and told King to be ready by 1 May. In anticipation, Stark reinforced the Atlantic Fleet by sending King three battleships, an aircraft carrier, and numerous smaller ships from the Pacific Fleet.

However, Roosevelt did not think the American public was ready for war. As he tried to balance public opinion with his policy priorities, he rapidly vacillated between different positions. Initially, Roosevelt tried to declare an enlarged Western Hemisphere out of bounds to Axis warships. His intent was to protect British convoys without having to escort them directly. When the President shared his plans in a 17 April cabinet meeting, Secretary Stimson recognized it would lead to war. Roosevelt backed away from his aggressive stance, but Stark had already ordered King to prepare to “*attack*” Axis ships inside the hemispheric





Admiral James O. Richardson, USN (centre), Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet observes fleet manoeuvres from his flagship, USS Pennsylvania January-May 1940. With him are (left) Admiral Charles P. Snyder, Commander, Battle Force, U.S. Fleet, and (right) Vice Admiral William S. Pye, Commander Battleships, Battle Force. (Photo U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

boundary. King's instructions were changed to "trail" and "report" the movements of Axis ships, rather than attacking them. Fortunately, King was able to hear the President's perspective directly. During a meeting at Hyde Park, the President's home in New York, he told King that national policy required a combination of "bravery and bluff."

Further bluffs were coming. After the German battleship Bismarck sortied into the Atlantic in May 1941, President Roosevelt declared an "unlimited national emergency" and sent a detachment of Marines to Iceland. Ostensibly, their mission was to relieve the British garrison, but Roosevelt's real objective was to give the Atlantic Fleet an excuse to escort convoys in the Western Atlantic. King formed a convoy with heavy escort and brought the Marines safely to Iceland on 7 July. In the meantime, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Stark suggested using it as an opportunity to start escorting convoys "immediately." Roosevelt was receptive and told King to prepare. He envisioned collaborating with the Royal

broader Japanese offensive, Roosevelt cancelled the escort plans because he did not want to be forced to transfer more ships from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

In August 1941, President Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and their military advisors met in Placentia Bay, Newfoundland for the Atlantic Conference. King and Stark used the opportunity to clarify plans for convoy escort. They divided North Atlantic in two, with the United States responsible for the western half and the British for the eastern. King asserted control of the RCN forces in the Western Atlantic and divided convoy escort responsibilities between his ships and those of the Canadians. With these plans drafted and the Atlantic Charter proclaiming the ideals the United States would fight for, Roosevelt was willing to approve convoy escort operations. They officially began at the end of August 1941.

Although war had not been declared, combat was inevitable as King's ships tried to prevent Axis submarines from attacking the convoys. The first exchange of fire came on 4 September when destroyer Greer exchanged fire with U-652. President Roosevelt used the opportunity to deliver his "shoot-on-sight" speech on 11 September. In it, he compared Axis submarines to "rattlesnakes" and publicly endorsed the aggressive stance King had adopted. The first deadly encounter came on 16 October, when destroyer Kearny was torpedoed by U-568 South of Iceland. Thanks to King's emphasis on drill and preparation, Kearny's crew reacted quickly, stopped the flooding, and saved the ship, but several of her crew were killed. Roosevelt used the attack to further justify his Atlantic policy and reiterated his orders to shoot "the rattlesnakes" on sight.

Canadian Navy (RCN) to escort convoys in the Western Atlantic. However, the official integration of U.S. and British forces was still a step too far for Roosevelt. He rejected the plan on 10 July.

Stark privately complained that "policy seems to be something never fixed, always fluid and changing." He had his planners produce new guidance; King's ships would escort convoys of Icelandic and American flagged vessels back and forth to Iceland and time their sailings so that other ships-ones bound for Britain-might join them. This was a clever way to escort British convoys without "officially" doing so. However, before these plans could be implemented, Roosevelt learned of Japanese plans to invade Southern Indochina. Fearing that might signal a

Soon thereafter, on 31 October, destroyer Ruben James was torpedoed and sunk by U-552. Just 45 sailors out of a crew of over 150 were rescued. The sinking of Ruben James caused a “stir” in Washington, but Roosevelt remained firm, and the American people backed him. Throughout these events, Roosevelt’s policy adjusted to capitalize upon opportunities. Rather than viewing this adaptive approach as a frustration, King saw it as a challenge. The result was an effective strategy that allowed Roosevelt to achieve one of his primary goals—support for Great Britain—while delaying U.S. entry into the war.

## Conclusion

President Roosevelt’s relations with Admirals Richardson, Stark and King illustrate the vital importance of effectively bridging the civil-military divide. Throughout the latter half of 1940, Richardson did not bridge the gap. He felt he knew better than Roosevelt and, when confronted with a policy decision he opposed, questioned the President’s decision making and quality of his leadership. In effect, Richardson inverted the civil-military hierarchy and assumed his view of the situation was superior. The result, quite appropriately, was his relief.

However, another result was the lack of a clear strategy for how to employ the Fleet based at Hawaii. When Richardson was relieved, this responsibility fell to Admiral Kimmel. He crafted a sophisticated plan for using the Pacific Fleet to raid Japanese positions and threaten the flank of a Japanese southward advance. However, Kimmel’s approach did not acknowledge the threat represented by the Imperial Japanese Navy, which, rather than a deterrent, saw the deployment of the Pacific Fleet to Hawaii as an opportunity to make a

crippling first strike. A more balanced perspective before Kimmel assumed command might have mitigated Japanese aggressiveness.

In contrast to the Pacific, a very effective strategy emerged in the Atlantic. That was because King, Stark and Roosevelt collaborated well. The President set the policy. That policy was vague and fluid because Roosevelt wanted the flexibility to respond to international developments—such as German aggression—as well as public opinion. Stark occasionally grew frustrated with Roosevelt’s changing policies, but he worked to translate the President’s desires into effective plans. King viewed the situation as a challenge and rose to it. He proved himself an extremely effective translator of vague policy guidance who could turn it into clear direction for the Atlantic Fleet.

The result was not only an effective strategy for the Atlantic. Over the course of 1941, King proved that he

could work with Roosevelt and Secretary Knox to translate the administration’s policy goals into military action. In this regard, King was a very effective strategist, an officer who could navigate the gap between civilian authority and military decision making; he could speak to leaders on both sides of that gap with clarity and insight. Roosevelt recognized this was invaluable; after the destruction of the bulk of the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, he and Knox turned to Admiral King to lead the U.S. Navy. It would be one of the best choices they made.

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Trent Hone

# OPERATION DHARALI

'NATION FIRST' AND WITH THE PEOPLE ALWAYS

Afternoon, 05 August 2025 - a sudden cloudburst in the Dharali - Harsil Valley in the Kheer Gad area of Uttarkashi District carved a path of destruction through narrow Himalayan valleys. A wall of water and mud tore through homes, swept away infrastructure and blocked access routes. The scale and suddenness of the calamity presented the kind of worst-case scenario for mountain rescue teams: landslides, broken roads and bridges, and disrupted communications and people trapped beneath metres of debris. In that crucible, the Indian Army - the de facto first responder in many mountain emergencies - moved swiftly and with deliberate purpose - within minutes' men and machines were enroute.

## The First to Reach

Cloudbursts in the Himalaya are sudden and localised, giving authorities only minutes to respond. In the Dharali and Harsil sector, that little window mattered enormously. The Army unit nearest to the affected valleys was among the first organised responders. Within minutes' troops in hundreds were mobilised rapidly to the disaster site. In mountain disasters, the difference between life and death is often measured in hours. The Army's doctrine and training for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) emphasises immediate local action.

To this end, men from the nearest Army unit moved to the scene, started evacuating the injured, and secured landing zones for follow-on air support. The field company began clearing approach routes, medical teams set up triage points at Harsil and aviation assets coordinated to evacuate critically injured civilians. Over the next few days, the unit persevered in the awful weather and terrain as they continued to dig, search and save. The response combined the Army's long-standing ethos of "**nation-first**" with new tools – drones, ground-penetrating radar and specialist dog squads and relentless human courage.



*A soldier serves tea to pilgrims and tourists evacuated from Dharali - Harsil*

## Duty Amidst Grief

One of the harsh realities of mountain rescue operations is that first responders can themselves be caught by the same hazard. The flash flood in Harsil swept through an Army camp and nearby positions, nine Army personnel went missing in this initial onslaught. The losses gripped the battalion - but they did not stop the mission. The Commanding Officer (CO) of the Harsil Battalion, personally led 150 soldiers in critical rescue and relief operations. The same soldiers who had just lost their comrades, who were still processing their own trauma, immediately transformed their grief into purposeful action. They understood that hundreds of pilgrims on religious journeys, local residents, tourists - were trapped in the disaster zone with no way out and no one else to help them.

Record the twofold character of the Army's response in the immediate aftermath: **grief** and **duty**. The Harsil Battalion re-deployed its remaining manpower to shore up search teams, assist civilians and maintain medical and logistics support to valley communities. That continuation of effort under severe emotional strain underlines one of the Army's



defining institutional traits: mission-first resolve coupled with a deep sense of responsibility for the people in the area.

### High-Tech Search

The Himalayan valley that runs through Dharali and Harsil is a maze of boulders, collapsed structures and deep sediment deposits. Traditional hand-search techniques are essential, but when spaces are obstructed by tons of mud and rock, technology can accelerate the search for survivors and the recovery of the missing.

In **Operation Dharali**, we integrated a suite of technologies: aerial drones for rapid reconnaissance and mapping, sniffer-dog squads for locating human scent in debris, and ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to probe buried voids and bodies. The Army's use of these assets allowed search teams to prioritise high-probability areas and to push into dangerous terrain with better situational awareness.

Drones offered a rapid, safe way to survey inaccessible stretches of the valley and locate survivors on ridgelines or stranded along riverbanks. Parallel to the aerial assets, GPR detachments scanned rubble fields and perched terraces to identify cavities where survivors might be trapped. In several cases, GPR indicated the likely presence of buried objects, allowing specialised excavators and human teams to work with greater focus.

Sniffer dogs - always a force-multiplier in collapsed-structure searches - were also extensively used. Masked by weather and ambient noise, scent detection remains one of the most reliable ways to locate living persons amid rubble. Six specialized Army canines namely Opna, Jansi, Sara, and three others were inducted for search and rescue operations. These remarkable animals, with their acute senses and extensive training, could detect human presence beneath debris where even sophisticated electronic equipment might fail. Working in carefully

planned cycles with their handlers to avoid exhaustion, these dogs moved across unstable rubble fields with extraordinary focus. The teams of dogs and handlers worked around the clock, often in tandem with GPR and manual diggers, in an exhausting but methodical search regime.

### Medical Assistance

When disaster strikes, survival depends on rapid medical intervention, control of bleeding, resuscitation and evacuation to a higher-level facility. The Army's layered medical units ranging from battalion medical aid post to field hospitals - provided a continuum of care under daunting conditions. Army doctors and paramedics worked with local health services and civil disaster teams to treat crush injuries, fractures and shock. Mobile medical supplies, oxygen, splints and analgesia were brought forward by helicopter when road access was blocked. Dozens of patients were provided immediate medical attention and additional medicines and supplies were flown in from rear bases.

Beyond immediate treatment,

Army medical teams helped maintain continuity of care for those stranded for longer periods - monitoring wounds, preventing infection, continuing nutrition and hydration management. In remote mountain areas like Harsil, such ongoing caregiver presence can mean the difference between full recovery and longer-term disability.

### Communications:

#### A Lifeline When Networks Collapse

One of the crippling aspects of mountain disasters is the collapse of communications. The Harsil/ Dharali cloudburst damaged infrastructure including mobile towers. In this crisis, the Army's communications teams and improvisational use of alternate technologies was impressive.

Signallers used satellite phones and other resilient links to re-establish command and control and to provide a communications lifeline to stranded civilians and pilgrims. Satellite communications enabled commanders to coordinate helicopters, ground movements, logistics and medical reinforcements, and crucially let



Rescue operations after cloudburst at Dharali in Uttarkashi (Photo adgpi/X via PTI)



*Debris being removed as security personnel keep vigil at flood-ravaged Dharali of Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand on August 7, 2025 (Photo PTI)*

families know the status of loved ones. At the stranded pilgrimage pockets, Army personnel became the only functioning point of contact, relaying information back and forth long before commercial coverage was restored. That practical bridge - a combination of radio sets, satellite phones and on-site liaison - prevented chaos, guided evacuations and sustained morale among trapped groups.

### **Building Access After Nature's Disruption**

Disasters in mountain valleys frequently sever the arteries of supply: roads, bridges and tracks that connect villages to larger towns. We restored access and built temporary bypasses. Engineers worked to clear debris and erected temporary footbridges. Simultaneously, teams constructed a 330-foot cableway to connect road sections submerged or destroyed by the floods.

In this calamity, aviation assets became absolutely critical for survival. The Indian Air Force immediately launched a comprehensive joint operation. Mi-17 and ALH Mk-III helicopters stationed at Bareilly were placed on high alert, while An-32 and C-295 transport aircraft from Agra landed in Dehradun to support the mission. This rapid mobilization of air assets from multiple bases demonstrated the seamless coordination between the Army and Air Force - two services united by a single mission: save lives. The

Chinook and Mi-17 helicopters transported nearly 400 people safely from the disaster-affected areas to the Indo Tibetan Border Police, Matli Camp and to Jolly Grant Airport, Dehradun.

Logistics in the mountains often requires improvisation: aerial delivery of rations, using pack animals where roads fail, or building temporary tracks with engineering detachments. The Army's experience in mountainous HADR repeatedly shows that field engineers can restore lifelines faster than would otherwise be possible.

### **Coordinating the Response**

While technology and logistics matter, **Operation Dharali** was also an intensely human endeavour. Local villagers, Army soldiers, state rescue teams, volunteers and paramilitary personnel worked side by side. The Army's approach emphasised coordination: integrating National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams, state police and medical services under unified tactical incident management. By pooling resources, distinct agencies could provide complementary capabilities - the Army's manpower and aviation, the NDRF's specialist rescue equipment, and the state administration's local knowledge.

The Army's ethos of service, its presence in remote communities long before the disaster - fosters trust that can matter greatly in crisis. The pre-existing civil-military familiarity smoothed coordination and allowed faster acceptance of evacuation orders and trust in Army-led relief decisions.

### **Psychological Help and Public Reassurance**

Survivors of sudden floods often require more than physical care. Shock, acute stress reactions, grief and disorientation are common. The Army's field medical and welfare teams provided basic psychological counselling: reassurance, clear information about next steps, and connected families. That simple human contact - a voice on a satellite phone, a soldier standing with an elderly survivor in a field clinic - becomes part of the healing process. Public reassurance is also part of strategic crisis leadership. The visible presence of disciplined uniformed teams, organised medical evacuation and systematic triage reduces panic and helps civil authorities prioritise reconstruction.

### **The Cost of Service: Loss and Remembrance**

No account of **Operation Dharali** can avoid the human cost to the

rescuers themselves. Nine Army personnel were missing and search for eight of them still carries on. They were a stark reminder that those who run toward danger sometimes pay the highest price. That stoicism - continuing to help civilians while honouring the fallen is a recurring motif in how militaries cope with tragedy: grief balanced with a recognition that many lives depend on sustained action. The Army's formal channels began the process of casualty management and welfare support for next-of-kin - procedures that, while administrative, are vital to honouring sacrifice and sustaining morale across formations.

### Lessons in Practice: What the Operation Underlined

**Operation Dharali** reinforced several operational lessons for mountain HADR:

- **Local presence matters.** Units already stationed in the valley acted faster than distant reinforcements. That local proximity saved lives in the crucial early hours.
- **Technology must be married to human skill.** Drones, GPR and LiDAR enhanced situational awareness and were essential to turn data into life-saving excavation and medical care.
- **Communications resiliency is not optional.** Satellite communications and resilient radios proved decisive when cellular infrastructure failed. Pre-planned communications redundancy enabled coordination of air assets, medical evacuation and logistics.
- **Multi-agency integration saves time.** Coordinated command posts that integrated Army, NDRF and local administration avoided duplication and accelerated evacuation, sheltering and supply.

### Discrete Acts of Service

On the map, statistics convey scale: hundreds rescued, dozens treated, multiple teams operating around the clock. But it is the discrete moments - a medic stopping to warm an elderly patient's hands, a dog handler refusing to rest until a positive signal was validated, an engineer rigging a makeshift footbridge so an elderly pilgrim could be evacuated that define operational character.

Several widely reported vignettes captured these small but significant acts: men negotiating vertical slopes with stretchers, pilots pressing into marginal weather to insert rescue teams, and local soldiers offering shelter to pilgrims until more permanent transit could be arranged. Such actions reflect the Army's manual, tactical training and its institutional culture of service under stress.

### The People's Trust

The spectacle of an institution in uniform leading rescue operations has a multiplier effect. Practically, it channels capabilities by disciplined manpower, logistics, aircraft and medical teams into the disaster zone. Symbolically, it projects state capacity and reassurance. In **Operation Dharali**, the Army's combination of speed, visibility and continuity of effort strengthened public trust in the short term and helped civil authorities coordinate relief in a region where government presence is naturally thin because of terrain.

This is not a rhetorical point. In mountain emergencies, there is often no single agency capable of rapidly doing everything; a credible, capable military response fills that vacuum while civil institutions scale up. **Operation Dharali** reiterated that role.

### From Rescue to Recovery

Immediate rescue is only the first phase. Recovery entails rebuilding roads and lifelines, re-establishing sustainable shelter and dealing with economic disruption; and will take months and years. The Army's role typically evolves from direct rescue to support helping clear major debris, assisting in temporary infrastructure, offering engineering assistance for road and bridge reconstruction, and continuing to provide medical outreach in the short-term aftermath.

Army engineers often remain engaged for weeks, providing bridging solutions and restoring limited road access until permanent civil works can be implemented. Their training in mountain works, constructing temporary bridges, shoring unstable slopes and constructing tracks is often indispensable while permanent reconstruction is planned and financed.

Besides, honouring the lives that ended in the cloudburst, both civilians and soldiers, is not merely ceremonial. It must be coupled with measures that reduce risk in future disasters: investment in resilient infrastructure, community early-warning systems, pre-positioned HADR caches, and continued training for multi-agency mountain response. The Army's field experience provides valuable lessons for planners and policymakers on what works in high-altitude emergencies.

### Reflections on Ethos

If one searches for a through-line in **Operation Dharali**, it is the Army's ethical framing of service - "**Nation-First**" and "**With the People Always**". The institution's precepts - discipline, self-sacrifice, and public service were visible at every level: in





Indian Army troops using a Ground Penetrating Radar to detect missing persons under debris (Photo tagtv.info)

commanders coordinating multi-agency operations, medics stabilising patients, pilots flying into uncertain weather, engineers working to restore supply lines, and rank-and-file soldiers clearing debris with little rest.

That ethos does not erase the tragedy of lives lost; it contextualises sacrifice as part of a larger public covenant. Soldiers who enter mountain valleys for rescue are not there to be celebrated for spectacle; they are there because, in the Army's institutional logic, the nation's people are its first charge. **Operation Dharali** was an expression of that logic in action: an organised, technically capable and morally resolute effort to save lives under extraordinary conditions.

### End Note

When catastrophe strikes, it tests not only technical readiness but social values. The response in the Dharali - Harsil valley where soldiers, medics, engineers and rescuers worked in the rain and rubble to find survivors and to provide care - was both a test and a demonstration. It showed the practical value of preparedness (training,

technology and logistics) and the deeper value of a service ethos that places people ahead of institutional comfort.

The Army's actions in the valley - rapid mobilisation for rescue, integration of modern search technologies, re-establishing communications when commercial systems failed, engineering works to restore access, and tragically, the continuation of duty even after suffering losses - together offer a composite portrait of service that is technical, human and moral. For the communities of Uttarkashi, for pilgrims and for the nation at large, that presence was the difference between chaos and an organised, humane response.

As recovery proceeds, the memory of men working through the night and the rains to pull people to safety - should be part of the region's story. It should also inform policy: investing in resilient mountain infrastructure, early-warning systems, and the equipment, training and inter-agency procedures that allow rescue teams to act faster and safer in the next emergency. **Above all, it affirms a simple truth that is often said but sometimes only proven in crisis: when the nation is tested, its institutions must act; and when they act well, they remind us that service and sacrifice are the sturdier foundation of public life.**



*Colonel Akshay Budhraj, an alumnus of National Defence Academy, Pune was commissioned into 16 Jammu & Kashmir Light Infantry in December 1999. The officer has held important command, staff and instructional appointments in varied terrain and challenging operational environments. He commanded his unit at the Line of Actual Control in Arunachal Pradesh. He has also served as an Instructor at Commando Wing, Infantry School, and on Staff in different formations. He holds a Master's Degree in Military Technology and Military Psychology. He is currently tenanted the appointment of Deputy Commander at an Independent Mountain Brigade along the Line of Actual Control.*



Col Akshay Budhraj



*Nanda Devi West at 7817 metres*

# NANDA DEVI

## THE ELUSIVE MOUNTAIN

The “Bliss Giving Goddess” or **Nanda Devi**, the patron goddess of Uttarakhand, is who this mountain massif owes its name to. Until 1808, **Nanda Devi** was the highest known peak in the world. A two-peak massif forming a long high ridge with the West summit higher than the East, the mountain is often referred to as the twin peaks of Nanda. The 23rd highest peak in the world, the mountain is notable for its steep features and has been likened to K2, the second-highest peak in the world, in terms of terrain and climbing difficulty.

**Nanda Devi** is the second highest peak in India, with Kangchenjunga being its highest. **Nanda Devi** forms one part of a ring of mountains enclosing an area designated the **Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve** and along with the neighbouring Valley of Flowers was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO and has been part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves since 2004. The sanctuary was upgraded to the status of a National Park and all treks, expeditions to **Nanda Devi Main**, and animal grazing were banned in the sanctuary area since 1984. **Nanda Devi East** remains open for climbing from its Southern side.

In 1993, our team of 40 – 35 Indian Army Sappers and five scientists - were granted a one-time permit to enter the sanctuary, to assess the impact of non-interference of humans on the growth of trees, herbs, medicinal plants, animals, and to clear the refuse left behind by previous expeditions, besides climbing the peak. Major (later Major General) VK Bhatt was the leader of this multi-faceted expedition.





*Climbing On all Fours at Swarg Ki Sidi (Ladder to Heaven)*

The road-head for our expedition was Reni, a small village ahead of Joshimath. There were no marked routes to the Base Camp from Reni, as access to this area had been banned. Local villagers indicated that there were two routes to the Base Camp. The first route, a gradual climb, was along Rishiganga River, and the second route was over the Dharansi Pass. Two reconnaissance teams of four members each were formed, one under me and the other under Major AS Thind, to check the routes for suitability.

My group started climbing to Dharansi Pass. We realised that the pass was too steep for a small team as ours to handle. Reaching the Pass was the beginning of yet another challenge - the steep and slippery descent with no holds to control our descent. We held on to whatever we could, like a strong grass blade, a clump of rock and most importantly the prayers in our heart. With bruised hands, we descended back to Reni and reported that this was not a suitable route for a big team. The second team crossed Rishiganga River many times over, improvising bridges and using old

Rishiganga River often used to be over the rocks which had got smoothened by flow of water over them. They were perfect to look at but dangerous to go across with the heavy manpack loads.

**Nanda Devi** is revered but also notorious for seeking 'Balidan' from all teams, daring to approach her. One day, we were making a bridge to cross a turbulent stretch of the river. In a couple of hours, we joined two long logs adjacent to each other and tied a rope at shoulder height for support. The experienced members formed a chain and helped in crossing the porters and the members. One of the porters was carrying a LPG cylinder which would swirl from side to side with his gait. This porter from Reni village was deaf and dumb but had proven strong in the previous days. While crossing he looked down at the swirling waters, got terrified and suddenly fell across, holding on to his dear life. We tried to pull him up but his body with the cylinder on his back, was pushed away by the current. We saw him tumbling across the rapids and ran on either side of the river but couldn't go more than 100 metres or so as the river suddenly fell into a gorge. His body was recovered a few days later downstream.

The incident evoked memories of the local legend of **Nanda Devi** taking at least one member of every expedition. Naturally, a grim mood settled on the team. While writing the sitrep, Major Bhatt asked as to what name this crossing place was known by. The porters mate replied '**Kalikona**' (Corner of Goddess Kali). There was pin drop silence as both the expedition members and the porters realized that no propitiation to Goddess Kali had been done before crossing at that spot. This was past practice, but the porters who belonged to that area had forgotten about it! It looked as if Goddess Kali had taken a '*jindaan*' herself. Coincidence or divine intervention - this was the first

dilapidated bridges too. After many difficult stretches, and after many tense moments, where the old track had vanished along a steep landslide, they reached the Chinwari camp site. In the next two days they were at Dibrugetta, a beautiful meadow, an apt reward for the hair-raising climb.

Owing to its comparative safety, the river route was chosen as the route to the Base Camp. The route involved crossing the river many times with no bridges, thus crossings proved to be a logistical nightmare. At places where the river was shallow, we waded across but in other areas, we had to 'construct' improvised bridges by laying trees across. The approaches to the steep banks of the



manifestation of the supernatural. We performed the puja accompanied by a ritual sacrifice of a goat to lift everybody's spirits.

Brushing our grief and pain aside, we trudged on. The trek route was not clear, we had to follow our instincts which led to many minor incidents. Many of our members broke their teeth due to falls on the moraines, while others sustained cuts and bruises. At Deodi, came the first major hurdle for the advance party. The Rishiganga had to be spanned with a bridge which had to survive the rising waters till the third week of June, for the expedition team to return via Dibrugheta and Dharansi.

We lugged 12 metre logs to the edge of the river and lowered them across for the bridge. It took the whole day to fashion a sturdy platform secured with planks and a fixed rope for a hand rail. From Deodi to Ramni, it was a relatively easy walk apart from the strain imposed by patches of soft snow. A climb up the Rishiganga South bank was followed by a descent to Trisul Nala, easily crossed by a snow bridge. Gradual gradients thereafter brought us to the Ramni campsite at the bottom of the cliffs lining the inner gorge.

The next challenge required abilities of a different sort from those exhibited at Deodi. The porters refused to carry loads up the fearsome walls of the inner gorge beyond Ramni. Amin Naik's persuasive mix of cajolery and threats proved insufficient to break the united move to strike work. Ultimately, bribery yielded dividends. A few porters still refused to budge but the majority succumbed to the inducement of lighter loads and extra *bidis*.

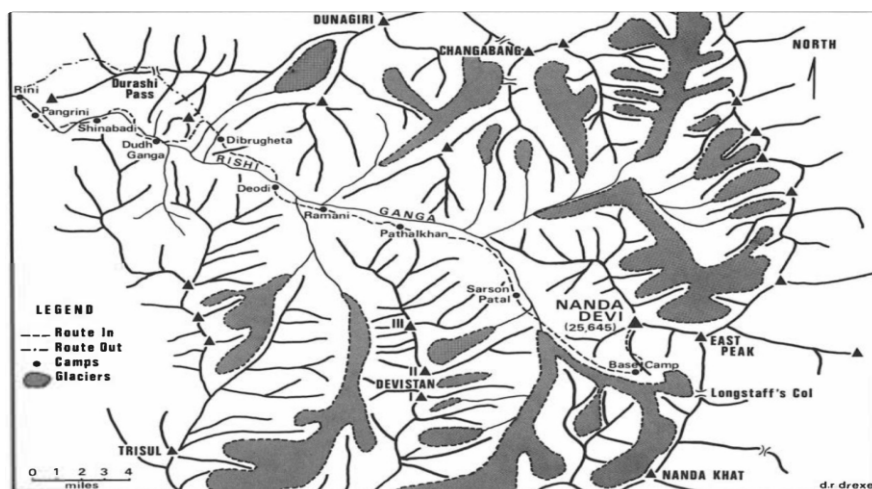
As we moved deeper into the sanctuary, the landscape and mountain light took on an unreal clarity and brightness. The air was fresher, the breeze colder, the morning sunlight sparkled off

the dew drops and glistening streams bubbled between rocks. The vegetation changed, oak and deodar forests were replaced by stands of pine and birch and later by hedges of dwarf rhododendron and finally by large meadows of wild flowers. *Ghorals*, who populated the cliffs above the Rishiganga, were replaced first by musk deer at Dibrugheta and then by *Bharal* or Blue Sheep above the tree line. The ravens at the road-head vanished and that ubiquitous companion of high altitude, the yellow-billed chough made its presence felt.

The presence of old hands like GK Sharma who had been on this mountain in 1980, and a few porters, helped us find the route beyond Ramni. Traces of the path had long vanished, worn away by wind and water or covered by the healing touch of soil and vegetation. Only bits of fixed rope and the occasional piton bore witness to a once frequented passage up the gorge walls. Frequent halts marked our painful crawl up the near vertical slopes, enviously eyeing a small herd of *bharal* mocking our puny

efforts as they swept up the ridge. Finally, we heaved ourselves over Tilman's famous 'Slabs' of smooth rock to reach the half way camp of Bhujgaira. This apology of a campsite is redeemed by the nearby spring and the friendly presence of the last of the birch. Heavy snowfall throughout the night forced an extra day's halt at Bhujgaira.

Route making on a dangerous traverse far above the Rishiganga, was constrained by lack of ropes and falling snow. Reaching Sarson Patal requires two days of stiff climbing. On the first day, treading with care over the narrow rock ledges of Shipton's '*mauvais pas*' we moved on to the rock staircase, appropriately christened '*Swarg ki Sidi*' (Ladder to Heaven) - a razor-thin path skirting steep cliffs over deep gorges with just enough space to place your boot and where fixed rope and pitons had to be placed for us to climb. This lethal path is one of the most dangerous spots in the Himalayas. However, we felt the Goddess' favour



Map of the Nanda Devi area showing route to the Peak (Map credit 1978 Seattle Garhwal Himalaya Expedition, Michael Clarke and D R Drexel)



*Camp at Pathal Khan*

on a number of occasions. A slip on rubble or overbalancing while crossing a bush protruding from the rock-face may become a headlong descent into a turbulent river deep below. Our large column of mountaineers and porters climbed the *Swarg Ki Sidi* safely. On the second day, we stepped around a veritable devil's maze of sharp rocks and chasms, also called Tilman's rock of Pisgah and we crossed Pathal Khan, a bizarre slate quarry of Nature's making. It took us three days, fifteen hundred metres of fixed rope, over a hundred pitons and frequent use of carabiners to ascend the walls of the inner gorge. Notably, we negotiated this obstacle with supreme confidence and more importantly without injuries. None of us could deny that divine favour shone upon us.

About a month from the day we started out, we reached the Base Camp, adjacent to a lake. One night, hearing a huge bang we rushed out to find the cause of the noise. Seeing nothing amiss and not sure what to make of this, we went back to sleep. To our utter surprise, the glacial lake close to our camp vanished overnight! The scientists attributed this disappearance to some unexplained geological phenomena occurring

deep within the earth's crust which had caused the water in the lake to be sucked into its deeper strata.

Load ferries began in all earnest to establish the four higher camps. We took about five weeks to open four camps, stock them up with regular back breaking load ferries. This helped in acclimatization and conditioning of the muscles and mind. We found remnants of previous expeditions in the form of broken and rusted wires, aluminium boxes, etc., at all campsites. At Camp I, there was no place to put up any tent, so we anchored the tents along a rocky wall at the base of the climb to the next camp and stocked it with all that we routinely carried from the Base Camp.

Camp II was established at the edge of the snow ridge. Luckily, we found a ledge big enough to accommodate a 6-man tent which served as the transit camp for the load ferries in days to come. Camp II inhabitants were welcomed by a picturesque view of the morning sun striking the tips of the adjoining peaks making them look like glowing candles. Equally noticeable was the chill of the dawn that was felt even inside the feather sleeping bags.

The team opened Camp III at a height of approximately 23000 feet. A night storm spared nothing, the tents, the small kitchen under a rock ledge, an empty can of pineapple tit bits and a lone pair of socks spread outside for drying. A thick layer of snow covered them all. Giving a cold shoulder to the lethargic call of the body, four team members were ready in their wind proof suits and snow boots to ferry the required load from Camp II to Camp III. The weather looked clear and fried tuna with buns and juice soothed the stomach.

The fresh snow under the feet seemed soft and cushioning, but only a climber can tell how hard it is to stomp your way through it. The four man team inched their way up the slope moving along the yellow climbing ropes which inter connected the two camps. It was their life line on that narrow Southwest ridge. The wind howled from both sides and hit them with tiny ice particles. At each piton they changed their *jumars* and continued. Major AS Thind noticed some scattered clouds below in the valley playing hide and seek with the lower slopes. A faint sense of alarm crossed his mind but the rope gave them confidence. One of the members lost his left glove while changing the jumar on the rope. He continued with the spare one but something was clearly wrong.....

Slowly clouds started forming up and rising to higher altitudes. In an hour it engulfed everything. Visibility was reduced to the next man



moving barely 15 steps ahead. The camp was still far away and the “white out” conditions made it hard to continue. The icy ground blended with the clouds and all one could see was a blank white space. They stopped to catch their breath when Kamboj complained of some wriggling sensation up his spine. The sensation increased and they sensed some danger. Thind started getting faint shocks in his head. Realization was sudden and they were sure that it was “St. Elmo’s Fire”- the low clouds were passing a charged electric field. They were carrying rucksacks with metal frames and there were several items with metallic content like sunglasses frames, ice axes and few nuggets of metals like metal rings on the gloves etc. Thind got his share of shocks through his metal frame and spectacles. Stories of two alpine climbers charred to death on the Annapurna Range crossed their mind.

Losing no time, they tied their metallic rucksacks to the nearest piton, changed their jumars and started descending using just the carabiner. By now the electric charge had grown in intensity and they could feel it flowing under their skin. Desperation made them run down at a speed they had never achieved before. Footsteps fell haphazardly, grip on the ice loosened but there was no stopping. A few more minutes at that altitude could have cost them their lives. They had to lose height to where the clouds thinned out and became harmless. It was their only chance. After what seemed like ages, they spotted the faint outline of a tent in the distance and they gave out a cry of joy. At last they were below the clouds, safe from the ever flowing electric monster. What a relief with the warm safety of sleeping bags and hot mugs of tea awaiting them at the camp.

The route between Camp III and IV was over a jumble of rocks and boulders, a total change of terrain from the icy slope of

Camp III. Beyond Camp III, we saw some old ropes stuck between big boulders. In 1982, a team of the Parachute Regiment had attempted to climb the mountain. It is believed that they climbed the peak but no concrete evidence was found to support their claim. Sadly, all five summiteers perished on the way down. No remnants of their bodies except some bones were found in the crevasses of boulders between Camp III and IV. Again at Camp IV, there was no space to pitch up a tent. We moved a few flat slabs of rock to get a semblance of a flat area and pitched up one tent somehow. Six of us, the first summit team, we all squeezed into the lone tent.

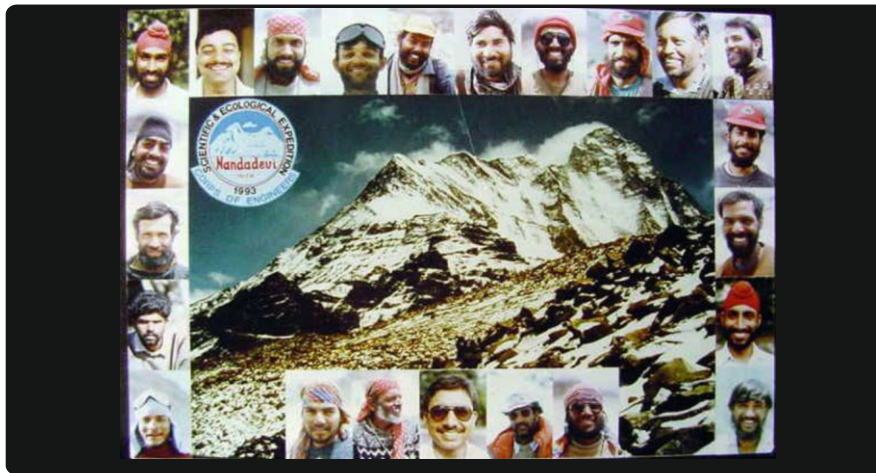
On 13 June at 0320 hours, the summit team, comprising Major Amin Naik, self (Captain Anand Swaroop), Captain Vinay Gupta, Mr GK Sharma, Havildar Didar Singh and Naik SP Bhatt were poised at Camp IV for the attempt on the summit. The Goddess gave us one shot at success and we set off for the climb.

Mr GK Sharma, the oldest (51 years) and the most experienced climber in the team recalls his summit attempt. “When I think of **Nanda Devi** expedition, I always think of the lack of personal conversation between members. I could only know at the end of the fixed rope (American Camp V site) that Captain Vinay Gupta had not started and we were only five on the mountain. Everybody started when ready, I started at 2.45 a.m and it was dawn when we gathered at the end of the rope that we had fixed two days back. We had opted to attempt the summit from Camp IV whereas normally **Nanda Devi** summit from the Southwest ridge route had been attempted from Camp V, the American Camp. It takes about 12 to 13 hours to reach the summit from Camp V (which was at 7224 metres). At dawn as we assembled at Camp V site, we roped up. Major Amin Naik was behind me as I was leading. We had two ropes with each member along with sufficient rock pitons and few ice pitons. We were



*Summit Party negotiating the summit wall near American Camp V on 13 June 1993*





*The Expedition Team with Nanda Devi West in the centre*

over 24000 feet of altitude and our progress was very slow. I would climb only three steps before taking a breather. The summit wall was in front of us, as the distances are difficult to judge in clear weather and shining snow. It took almost the whole day to reach the base of the summit wall.

Major Amin took the lead on the rock wall of the summit. We could see the remains of the old rope there, a sign that we were on the correct route. Amin grabbed an old rope which broke away. He fell down, though I was belaying him it was very difficult to arrest his fall, had he not arrested himself. All the ropes we were carrying had already been put. Amin started climbing and would give the clearance to come up as he was not going to be visible. By the time I heard his voice telling me to come up, Didar Singh had also reached me; so I told him to continue and call me when he reached the top of the rope. When I did not hear from him, I waited for some time; then shouted, but there was no response. Perhaps he forgot to shout, or I could not hear him. I then

started climbing up the rope. On climbing up, I came across an ice and rock mixed step about four feet high. That was little tricky but I made it to the top of it and to my surprise I walked onto a flat snow field and saw two climbers there. In fact, the summit of **Nanda Devi** cannot be defined as a point. It is a flat ground, the size of a football field. It was 5.10 p.m. SP Bhatt and Anand Swaroop reached later. For Anand Swaroop it was a commendable job to make it to the summit with his chilblained feet.

My first thought was to get down in time and safely. Clouds were all around but below the summit. The top of peaks were seen over the ocean of clouds. Our foremost priority was reaching the fixed rope point before it was dark. After much photography we descended. We reached the fixed rope point just in time. I desperately wanted to rest for a few minutes but Amin was pushing us really hard. Fortunately, Anand Swaroop was in front of me on the rope with his chilblained feet and had to be very slow. At one place Anand got stuck for quite a long time, somehow he was not able to change over to the next pitch of rope. I moved down to check and possibly assist but there was no problem. This could happen to anybody due to exhaustion and lack of oxygen. We had used up our total energy by the time we reached camp IV at 11.30 p.m. None of us had strength to make fire and heat juices. Vinay Gupta saved us by giving us hot water and juice”.

Major (later Major General) Amin Naik recalls, “*When we reached the top, it was completely white bound. We could not see the mountains all around us. We planted the flag, thanked the Goddess, took photographs and immediately began our descent back while the weather was good. We reached back only at 2330 hours!*”

The Goddess had favoured us en route – Amin Naik had a very close call when he slipped just short of the summit but miraculously recovered on his own. On the return back, the Goddess allowed the exhausted climbers to reach back safely – a privilege she had denied the Paratroopers in 1982. The summit team had sent a success signal at around 1730 hours on the short range radio set to Base Camp. Base Camp in turn relayed this wonderful news to the ecological team who were at Ramni to relay it to Lata and then onto Joshimath and New Delhi.

The very next day the monsoon broke and since we had already climbed the mountain and finished our ecological studies, the leader called off the expedition. The Rishiganga was now a monstrous torrent



Left Photo. Close to Camp III with Nanda Devi East in the background. Right Photo. Amin Naik and S P Bhatt on the summit, 13 June 1993

which could not be negotiated under any circumstances, so we returned via the traditional Dharansi route which was now clear of snow. On 21 June, the expedition marched into Lata and camped at the confluence of the Rishiganga and Dhauliganga Rivers on a flat bank below Reni village for rest and celebrations. The main celebration was a tremendous campfire dinner with the porters and villagers of Lata and Reni. The villagers sang Garhwali folk songs and the school children danced their traditional dance to the Goddess! I still remember them saying, "Nanda Devi <something something>, godi mein Lata Reni". We plied the villagers with rum while they plied us with their traditional rice-beer and rice-wine. I found myself standing next to the Signal NCO who was in charge of Lata village. I remembered and asked him – how come he had come to know of the success of the expedition before I told him.

He said "Sabab, we were sitting in the temple courtyard that afternoon and around 5 o'clock, all at once, the bells began ringing. Since there was no one inside the temple, we were amazed. The villagers started jumping around with joy

saying *Nanda Devi Mataji ne darsan diya*'. We then climbed the ridge and looked at the mountain. It was stormy, with thunder and lightning all around, as if the mountain itself was celebrating! We realised that this must be the case and hardly had I got back when your call came through!" The village *patwari* of Lata hastened to corroborate these events.

Divine providence? I like to think so. The Goddess had shown her favour to the team who returned safe and sound having achieved all their objectives and brought back over a thousand kgs of garbage from the mountain.



Colonel Anand Swaroop, SM\*\* (Retd) was commissioned in the Corps of Engineers in March 1989.

An alumnus of Defence Services Staff College, Wellington (TN), he commanded his parent unit in

Eastern Command. He has been an adventure enthusiast, having participated/ led many mountaineering expeditions including being a member of the successful Indian Army Everest Expedition of May 2001. He led the first Indian Ski expeditions to the South Pole and the

North Pole. A recipient of the Tenzing Norgay National Adventure Award (Arjuna Award), he superannuated in June 21.



Col Anand Swaroop



# A QUEST FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

After the 1999 Kargil War, the Indian Air Force (IAF) worked on enhancing the readiness of aircraft to operate in high altitudes, beyond normal operating parameters. This first person account describes the detailed planning and execution involved in landing Dornier aircraft at Leh, Thoise and Kargil.

## Introduction

I took over command of 41 Squadron, Air Force in June 1999, at the height of the Kargil crisis. The squadron was based at Palam and had a mixed fleet comprising Dornier DO-228 and HS748 Avro aircraft. A few months later, with the Kargil issue behind us, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C) Western Air Command (WAC) came on his annual inspection visit to the Squadron (Sqdn). During the presentation he “suggested” that we exploit the operational potential of the Dornier aircraft by operating it to Leh, Thoise and Kargil instead of just flying in the plains.

At the time of taking over command of the Sqdn, the outgoing Commanding Officer (CO), in his briefing to me, had mentioned a study done earlier on the same issue and explained to me the reasons why the aircraft was not capable of operating at these airfields. According to him, this matter routinely came up during the visits of senior officers to the Sqdn and every time they were informed about the performance limitations of the aircraft. They would eventually get convinced and give up the idea. I too gave the same explanation, but the AOC-in-C insisted that we do yet another study with a positive frame of mind. The message was clear - “Do it!”

## Limitations

Mentioning the limitations of operating the Dornier aircraft to these high-altitude airfields would be in order.

- The cabin of the Dornier aircraft is not pressurized and hence the aircraft is not cleared to fly above 10000 feet. To fly to Leh, Thoise and Kargil, the aircraft would need to climb to



Top. Dornier-228 taking off (credit defencesxp.com) Second from Top. Dornier-228 on taxi track (Credit economicstimes.indiatimes.com) Second from Bottom. Dornier-228 (Photo PTI) Bottom. The Author and his co-pilot, Squadron Leader Sankar Das after their historic landing at Thoise on 25 November 2000



20000 feet or higher, to remain clear of the high hills enroute. And in case of bad weather and clouding at 20000 feet, it would entail a climb to even higher altitudes.

- There is no anti-icing equipment available on the aircraft. Hence, it cannot be flown in clouds. Encountering icing conditions at the operating altitudes could prove to be fatal. If the aircraft got into icing conditions in the hills, there was no option but to continue flying at the assigned altitude or climb higher, because descent was not an option due to high hills (we encountered such a situation while executing a flight back from Leh to Srinagar and were forced to climb to 25200 feet, just skimming the clouds).
- As per the POH (Pilot Operating Handbook), the aircraft has a service ceiling of 25000 feet based upon the engine performance but requires fitment of an instrument called the maximum allowable air speed indicator (MAASI). This instrument ensures that the aircraft does not exceed the maximum speed (Mach Number) at high altitudes and thereby the structural limits especially during descent. This equipment is not fitted on the aircraft.
- The aircraft did not have an integral oxygen system for the crew and passengers. Two small capacity oxygen bottles are available for emergency purposes and barely last 20-25 minutes. Considering the possibility of diversion when overhead Leh, the requirement was to have oxygen for at least 2:30 hours.
- Leh, Thoise and Kargil airfields are in valleys of high mountains, with airfield elevations of approximately 10500 feet. Study of the graphs revealed that the aircraft could take off from Leh with the

minimum required fuel, crew and ground crew only up to an ambient temperature of 0 (zero) degree C. At temperatures higher than that, the graph did not permit take off, due considerations of obstacle clearance in the event of engine failure. This restricted the usage of the aircraft to the peak winter months only and even then no useful load or passengers could be carried.

### Preparation

We were about to venture into unknown territory, something the aircraft clearly had not been designed for. Some spade work had been done earlier by the Sqn. On every occasion, the study had proven beyond doubt that the aircraft could not operate at these high-altitude airfields. The studies had been carried out meticulously and the Command Headquarters (HQ) had been convinced of the inadvisability of such a venture. This time however, the resolve of the AOC-in-C was firm and

unshakeable. A job needed to be done, but just how, was the question.

To make it a “go” situation, we required clearance to fly above the normal operating altitude of 10000 feet, and somehow reduce the fuel requirement, thereby reducing the weight of the aeroplane. The take-off flight path also needed to be re-examined to see whether a lower single engine climb gradient was acceptable which till then was prohibitively high to permit a take-off. All this needed to be done, ensuring a safety margin, making the task more complicated.

Our eyes literally watered, poring over all the performance graphs. The graphs themselves were so small that a small mistake meant reducing the endurance by slightly over 10 minutes. To complicate matters, the graphs in the new edition of the manual were slightly different and more in numbers. In the meantime, with Command HQ permission, the aircraft was flown at 20000 feet. The results obtained were



*The author (second from right) presenting a memento to Air Officer Commanding Leh (Air Commodore FH Major, later Chief of the Air Staff, second from left) at Leh, 25 November 2000*



*Sergeant Vats (Engine Fitter) and Sergeant Duban (Instrument Fitter) standing in front of the DO - 228 at Leh*

dismal with the cruising IAS coming to only 120 knots. The endurance of the oxygen bottles was well below the certified endurance. Out of the three bottles tested, one lasted for 15 minutes, another for 23 minutes and the third for 25 minutes only. A second trial flight was conducted by operating the aircraft in the hills over Kullu and Shimla. The aircraft flew at 23000 feet. This time the climb rate was good, the single engine performance was much better, but the oxygen system continued to give problems as the bottles lasted much lesser than the given duration. During this trial, we faced another issue of the Perspex of three windows cracking due to trapped air.

We had to somehow get the oxygen issue resolved to make the flight happen. The requirement was to have at least 2 hrs 30 minutes of oxygen supply considering the duration of the flight from Srinagar to Leh and back to Srinagar with Udhampur as a diversionary airfield, in case of a contingency. We modified an oxygen system locally with greater endurance. The CO of the Air HQ Communication Sqn was a good friend, and he was

magnanimous enough to offer the emergency oxygen bottles of the B 737-200, and these served our purpose very well. I had flown the Dakotas in my initial days and Kiran aircraft during my instructional tenure and remembered that we used the cloth inner helmet along with an oxygen mask. The cloth inner helmet distributed the load evenly over the entire head and it did not cause any headache. We then procured a few sets of these from the Equipment Depot. Our technicians carried out a local modification, and we had an improvised oxygen system that made use of B 737 oxygen bottles, Kiran inner helmet and Dornier masks. This by itself was a unique feat considering we had been asked to restrict any modification to within

the Sqn. In other words, we had done JUGAAD as we are famed for. The system functioned well during the trials and finally we had surmounted all challenges as far as the preparation for the maiden flight was concerned.

With the flexibility of operating at 20000 feet, the route was altered, reducing the distance considerably, thereby reducing the fuel requirement as well. We were finally ready for the trial phase.

### Phase I

HQ WAC assigned us a helicopter sortie ex Srinagar with a brief to fly the intended route and fly back using the escape route to get familiar with it. I, along with Squadron Leader Sankar Das flew in the helicopter to Leh. We had a first-hand look at the proposed route and terrain around the airfields at Leh and Kargil. I had extensive experience in the area, both on An-32 and IL-76 aircraft. This time the route was different, and the terrain had to be seen in a fresh light, keeping the performance of the Dornier in mind. This was termed as Phase I of the high-altitude trials and on completion, the observations and recommendations were put up to Command HQ. Actual trials were carried out locally to obtain performance details, which were not given in the manual. Single engine drills were carried out at 10600 feet to check whether the rate of climb would suffice to clear the obstacles on the take-off path at Leh. Aircraft, which were known to have the more powerful engines, were selected for this purpose. Once satisfied we moved on to Phase II of the trials.

### Phase II

Phase II comprised actual route trials on the Dornier aircraft to Leh and back. A trial flight with Squadron Leader Atul Gade, who had

extensive flying experience in the area was flown from Srinagar. The weather and the visibility were excellent. In short, it was a picture-perfect day for the trial. The briefing by the Air II was to carry out two trial sorties to Leh and during the second sortie the aircraft was to descend over Leh and return to Srinagar by the planned escape route. As we progressed, the raw beauty of nature, untouched by the human hand, lay before us. The majestic Nanga Parbat, Nun Kun, the mountains North of Amarnath caves, K2 and Saser Kangri were visible along the route. Our route lay over the beautiful Sonmarg valley, Dras - the second coldest inhabited place on earth, Fotu La and then on to Leh. The trial was a success, and the performance of the aircraft was exactly as had been worked out on ground. Phase II of the trials having been concluded, we got on to the task of preparing for the last haul.

### Phase III (Leh and Thoise Landings)

Phase III of the trials was to carry out the landings at Leh and Thoise. In consultation with Command HQ, we decided to operate a Dornier detachment at Srinagar from 21 November 2000 as the temperatures at Leh, Thoise and Kargil would be zero degrees or in the negative, which was required for Dornier operations. Initially we were asked to plan landings at Leh and Thoise airfields. Kargil landing was to be planned at a later date.

I, along with Squadron Leader Sankar Das and two ground crew Sergeant Vats (Engine Fitter) and Sergeant Duhan (Instrument Fitter), would set course for Srinagar on 21 November 2000. After planning and coordination on 22 November, the trial landings were to be attempted on 23 November. We had to however, advance our plan by a day to 20 November 2000, due to expected bad weather in the hills over the next few days.

Despite this, we were disappointed because the weather moved in faster and earlier than expected and we were forcibly grounded for the next few days.

Those familiar with flying in the Northern Sector would be aware of the effects of a Western Disturbance passing the Northern parts of the country. The hills experience widespread rainfall / snowfall and extensive layer clouding making flying operations difficult during its passage. We too got stuck and remained grounded for the next few days. Our time was spent mainly on attending meteorological (Met) briefing, giving a ground run to the aircraft and cooling our heels in the cold temperatures. While the Met Officer was positive, the weather had a mood of its own and played truant.

Finally, a miracle occurred towards the evening on Friday, 24 November. The clouds started lifting and the rainfall / snowfall stopped in the hills. Our hopes began rising and the Met Officer

too became positive and assured good weather the next day.

Our excitement rose and we were confident of undertaking the flight the next day. That evening we went over our route in detail, briefed for all contingencies and looked into the finer details for our flight. Sure enough, the morning of 25 November dawned beautifully. There was a light cloud cover over the airfield. We got up early, finished our breakfast, donned our specially procured High Altitude flying suits (termed NATO suits), for our trials. The weather reports were good, and we expected no clouds at our operating altitudes. Everything went right that morning and it seemed nothing could go wrong. The aircraft taxied out with both of us in our NATO suits and the two ground crew, Sergeant Duhan and Sergeant Vats wearing adequate warm clothing.

Sergeant Duhan, an Instrument tradesman was responsible for the modified oxygen system and Sergeant



*The Author and Squadron Leader Ravi Dargan landed the DO-228 at Kargil on 30 January 2001*





*From Left, Wing Commander RK Sharma (the Author), Squadron Leader Sankar Das, Sergeant Vats (Engine Fitter) and Sergeant Duban (Instrument Fitter) after their historic landing at Leh on 25 November 2000*

Vats an engine tradesman was on board since we really did not know how the start-up at Leh would be. The Dornier had never been started at such an altitude on ground, and he was on board just in case it did not.

The aircraft rolled down the runway and lifted off the ground at 0820 hours. In no time the aircraft had pierced through the layer of clouding and voila! there was the sun in all its glory and every mountain peak visible on the horizon. The entire horizon was snow white and most of the features on ground could barely be seen due to the heavy snowfall during the entire week. We flew on with the engines behaving even better with temperatures lower than the standard ISA (International Standard Atmosphere) temperatures and helpful westerlies giving us a push. The whole route looked so different since we had last seen it during the route trials. It seemed like a giant snowfall had hit the mountainous areas, smothering it with snow. The lofty mountains with their snow-capped peaks were like eternal sentinels of the area. I

reminded myself that we had a job at hand and descent had to commence. Due to traffic, we were advised by Leh to report overhead at 19000 feet. Once overhead, we spiralled down to circuit height to join left downwind for R/W 07.

Descending continuously, we were soon on finals and moments away from finally 'logging' it as one would say. A steady approach with calm winds and soon the power was chopped for touch down. As the wheels of our aircraft touched the runway, we knew we had done it. The Dornier had landed on the highest operational runway in India!

Due to the high hills on the take-off path of runway 07, Leh has uni-directional landing and take – off directions. Runway 07 is used for landings

and runway 25 is used for take-off. Smaller aircraft with experienced instructors do practice circuits and landings on runway 25 but it is not recommended for normal operations. We carried out a few circuits for both the runways with simulated engine failure, and finally switched off to receive a warm welcome in the sub-zero temperatures of Leh. As far as the operations were concerned, we did not encounter any problems.

I presented a memento to the Air Officer Commanding Leh, marking the first ever landing by Dornier at Leh and he, in turn presented a memento from the Station to our Sqn. After a hot cup of tea, a refreshing breakfast and many photographs in between, we started up for the next leg of our trials to Thoise. We encountered no problems in starting up the engines.

Thoise airfield is located across the famous Khardung La with a runway orientation of 11/29, with 29 being the landing direction and 11 being the take-off direction. It is flanked by a high hill range on one side and a narrow valley on the other side.

After take-off from Leh, we climbed East of Leh to 20000 feet and crossed over Khardung La on to Khalsar. From there, the two valleys, one leading to the glacier and the other to Thoise, were visible. The descent was over the Y fork, the confluence of the Nubra and Shyok Rivers, an area of level ground in sharp contrast to the mountainous area all around. Soon we were on finals and in no time, we found ourselves on the rough runway of Thoise. Yet, another first had been achieved. A few circuits were carried out for both the runways, during which engine failure drills were carried out to check the aircraft performance. Once satisfied we finally switched off.

The scene here was the same and I presented a memento to the

Station Commander, Air Force Station Thoise on behalf of 41 Sqn. With the Leh and Thoise landings, I too had created history by becoming the only pilot to have landed at Leh and Thoise in An-32, IL 76 and Dornier aircraft DO-228.

An hour's halt and after refuelling, we set course for Srinagar. On the return we climbed to 22000 feet due to turbulence over Khardung La and maintained this all the way back. Enroute Srinagar, our oxygen bottles got exhausted and when the emergency bottles were finally connected, I could literally feel the breath of life coming back. Air, a thing which we take for granted, comes at a premium at high altitudes. The majestic mountains, the valleys and the altitude, altogether demand the utmost respect, the most careful homework and the best of attention so that while we admire them, we also get to go home and not become a part of the landscape. We landed back at Srinagar and after a quick stop, took-off for our home base at Delhi. That week we had a celebration in the Sqn.

### The Kargil Landing

Kargil Airfield is located in a narrow valley along the Suru River at an elevation of 9760 feet AMSL, runway orientation is 02/20. Take off and landings are uni-directional with landings permitted on Runway 20 and take-offs permitted on runway 02. The runway length is much shorter at 6000 feet unlike the Leh and Thoise airfields which are around 10000 feet. It is surrounded by high hills and very close to the Line of Control. The winds are generally cross and gusty. Unlike other airfields, the altitude on the downwind and finals has to be higher than normal making the final approach quite steep. This, coupled with the short runway length, and high airfield altitude make it challenging to land.

We planned to conduct the landing at Kargil on 30 January 2001 for which we positioned at Srinagar on 29 January 2001. My co-pilot this time was Squadron Leader Ravi Dargan. I had operated to Kargil on the An-32 earlier while he had not. The weather was quite good, there were no clouds and we had unlimited visibility but experienced mild to moderate turbulence all along. The flight duration was a little less compared to the flight to Leh since Kargil is only about half the distance from Srinagar as compared to Leh. We came overhead Kargil at 14000 feet, joined circuit and made an approach and landing followed by a take-off and another landing. We practiced engine failure after take-off and found that the aircraft met the laid down performance criteria. We did not switch off here as we had to proceed to Thoise and Leh.

While returning from Leh to Srinagar, we started experiencing continuous moderate turbulence at our planned altitude of 20000 feet. Short of

Kargil, the clouds also started building up and we then climbed to 23000 feet. Though we remained clear of clouds, the turbulence became so severe that Sergeant Duhan became seriously ill. We too felt uncomfortable in the aircraft. A decision was taken to return to Leh since we were closer to it. We finally landed at Leh where Sergeant Duhan had to be hospitalised due to airsickness. He became better the next morning.

By the next day the weather also was beginning to pack up due to an approaching Western Disturbance. After discussion with the Met Officer, we planned to depart at first light. The initial part of the flight was uneventful, and we climbed to our assigned altitude of 20000 feet, but soon the clouds started appearing forcing us to climb higher. I had till then flown the aircraft up to 23000 feet. But even at this altitude there was no let up. So, I continued the climb and finally reached an altitude of 25200 feet, we were just



*The Dornier at Leh*



*The Midget and the Mighty - The Dornier (in the background) and the IL-76 at Leh*

skimming the top of the cloud layer. Technically this was 200 feet above the manufacturer's laid down ceiling of 25000. I had reached a situation where I could not turn back and had no choice but to continue to Srinagar. The next 20 minutes till the time we were clear of the hills were the quietest time I ever spent in the cockpit in my 45-year aviation career. Both of us had our heart in our mouths and silently prayed that we do not have an engine failure at this stage. We would have to descend in clouds and with no anti ice system, would be flying blind with no visual reference in the high terrain. Anyway all is well that ends well. We came overhead Srinagar, did a spiral descent and landed. With this, I had once again become the only pilot to have landed at Kargil on the An-32 and Dornier aircraft. Unfortunately, those were the days when we did not have mobile phones. All I had was a digital camera with limited capacity of storing 8-10 photos and I could not click a picture of the altimeter for record purposes and posterity.

world. Despite substantial odds, we had flown the aircraft well above its normal flight altitudes, had resorted to **"Jugaad"** to improvise an oxygen system to meet our requirements and had been successful in carrying out the landings. **It was a daunting but satisfying challenge and I am glad I lived up to it.**

## Conclusion

These landings were indeed a historic achievement. It was a great feat to have flown an unpressurised aircraft to above 25000 feet, in the hilly terrain, and airfields that were among some of the highest in the world. I am told that not much happened after I had handed over command of the Sqn. The reason was that there were too many variables that had to be factored in and not much utility was seen since we could only operate in good weather, extremely low temperatures and of course not much useful load or passengers could be ferried. But I draw solace in the fact that I flew an aircraft designed to be flown at 10000 feet and in the plains and went on to land at the highest and most difficult airfields in the



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**Group Captain  
RK Sharma**





*Jaismine with her uncles Sandeep and Parvinder*

# JAISMINE LAMBORIA

## THE GIRL WHO PUNCHED THROUGH BARRIERS

From Bhiwani's Mini-cuba to  
The Army Sports Institute  
**The Rise of A World Champion**

In the boxing heartland of Bhiwani, Haryana — fondly called “Mini Cuba” for producing a string of national and international champions — a young girl grew up believing she could fight her way into history.

Today, **Naib Subedar Jaismine Lamboria**, world champion boxer and soldier of the Indian Army, stands as a living testament to that belief. This year she has won the Gold Medal in the Featherweight Class in the World Boxing Championship at Liverpool, England in September 2025, and the Gold Medal again in the Featherweight Class in the World Boxing Cup at New Delhi in November 2025.

Born in 2001, Jaismine was raised in a modest household with three sisters and one brother, in a family where discipline and sportsmanship ran deep. Her uncles, Sandeep and Parvinder Lamboria, both international boxers, were her earliest inspiration and first coaches, while her grandfather, a wrestler and soldier of the Regiment of GUARDS, embodied the fighting spirit that became her legacy. “I grew up watching my uncles train and my grandfather wear his Army uniform with pride,” she says. “Those sights stayed with me. I wanted to do something that made my family proud.”



Jasmine Lamboria (women's 57kg) went on to clinch a gold medal as she defeated Poland's Szymeta Julia 4-1 at the World Boxing Championships 2025 in Liverpool, 13 September 2025 (Image World Boxing)

### Early Days: Breaking Stereotypes

Jasmine first expressed her wish to take up boxing while studying in sixth or seventh grade. Her mother, like many mothers then, hesitated. *"She thought boxing was too rough for a girl,"* Jasmine recalls. *"But I was determined."* By the time she reached Class 10, her mother shared her daughter's wish with Sandeep and Parvinder - who not only supported her but decided to train her themselves. *"They told my mother that if boys in the family can box, why not a girl?"*

Under their strict yet nurturing guidance, she began learning the basics - from stance and balance to the discipline that defines champions. *"They taught me to fight fair, stay humble, and respect the sport,"* she says. Her training conditions were simple and rudimentary. There were no girls to spar with, no modern facilities. Often, her uncles would take turns sparring with her themselves. To give her more exposure, they took her to different academies across Haryana, where she faced tougher, more experienced boxers. Those years were tough, but they laid the foundation for the athlete she would become. *"My uncles built me from the ground up,"* she says. *"Whatever I've achieved rests on the foundation they laid."*

### The Turning Point

Her first big breakthrough came when she won Gold in the All India University Championship (57 kg

category) - a defining moment that validated her choice. *"That medal changed everything,"* she recalls. *"It gave me confidence that I belonged in the ring."* Her success continued, and in 2022, she captured national attention by winning the Bronze Medal at the Commonwealth Games.

That achievement brought her into the spotlight and opened a new chapter in her life - the opportunity to serve in the Indian Army. *"When the Army approached me, it was a dream come true,"* she says. *"I used to wear my grandfather's uniform as a child, not knowing that one day, I would earn one of my own."*

### Joining the Indian Army

In 2024, Jasmine joined the Corps of Military Police (CMP) and began her professional training at the Army Sports Institute (ASI), Pune - a world-class facility known as the **'Cradle of Olympians.'** Established in 2001, ASI has been instrumental in identifying and grooming India's sporting talent with military precision. It has produced numerous Olympians and world medallists who proudly represent both the Indian Army and the nation.

*"When I joined ASI, I realized this was a completely different level,"* says Jasmine. *"The environment here is scientific and disciplined. There are psychologists, nutritionists, and strength coaches - everything an athlete needs to improve. I discovered new strengths I never knew I had."* Naib Subedar Jasmine Lamboria embodies the true champion's mindset - resilient, focused, and fearless. Her transformation after joining ASI reflects the spirit of a soldier-athlete who turns discipline into excellence. She credits ASI with transforming her as both an athlete and a person. *"Earlier I was calm and composed, but after joining the Army, I found the josh in me. That's what the Army gives you - the fire to push your limits."*

### The ASI Impact: Where Champions are Forged

At ASI, Jasmine's growth accelerated. The institute's integrated system of sports science, psychology and physical conditioning refined her skills while instilling military discipline. Lieutenant Colonel D S Thapa, Officer-in-Charge, Boxing ASI adds, *"She is self-propelled and self-disciplined and a highly competitive boxer who never misses a day of practice, and always arrives with a smiling face."* Her coach at ASI, Subedar CL Yadav mentions, *"Jasmine stands out because of her humility and focus. She trains with the same discipline soldiers take to the battlefield."*

The training system at ASI also emphasizes mental toughness - something Jasmine says has become her biggest strength. *"Boxing is not*

only physical; it's about staying composed under pressure. The Army has taught me to channel my emotions and fight with clarity."

### A Soldier's Strength

Wearing the uniform brought new meaning to her life. "After joining the Army, I've learned to carry myself with pride, dignity, and composure," she says. "There is a go-getter attitude that becomes part of who you are. You stop saying **I can't** and start saying **I will**."

Her family has been her anchor throughout. Her mother, a homemaker, and father, a Home Guard, continue to be her strongest supporters. "They've always stood by me, no matter the results," she says. "They're the calm behind my storm." Despite her growing fame, Jaismine remains grounded. "At home, I'm just Jaismine," she says with a smile. "My parents and siblings keep me connected to who I really am."

### Life Beyond the Ring

Away from competition, Jaismine is a simple, cheerful soul who finds happiness in small things. "I love listening to music, singing songs, dancing, and drawing whenever I get time," she shares. "Anything that makes me happy keeps me balanced." After intense training sessions, her priority is recovery. "I make sure to get complete rest after practice. That's when your body rebuilds and your mind resets. Rest is as important as training." Her hobbies, she says, are what keep her emotionally strong. "They remind me that life is beautiful beyond the ring too."

### Inspiring the Next Generation

At ASI, Jaismine often interacts with the young girls of the Girls Sports Company (GSC) - a unique Army initiative to identify and train talented athletes at a young age. "When I see the girls of GSC train, I feel proud and hopeful," she says. "They're getting exposure and guidance that I received only later in my career. What they're learning today will make them the

champions of 2032 and 2036." One of her mentors at ASI observes, "She's not just a boxer - she's a role model. She motivates younger athletes to dream big, train hard, and stay humble."

### Eyes on the Future

Looking ahead, Jaismine has her sights firmly set on the 2028 Olympics. "That's my main goal," she says with quiet determination. "After that, the Commonwealth and Asian Games. Every time I enter the ring, I carry the Indian flag in my heart." She believes medals are important, but character matters more. "It's not just about winning. It's about representing your country with dignity and giving your best effort every single time."

### The Spirit of a Fighter

From the narrow lanes of Bhiwani to the training rings of ASI, Pune, Naib Subedar Jaismine Lamboria's journey is a story of courage, conviction and consistency. It is also the story of how the Indian Army, through institutions

like ASI, continues to nurture sporting excellence and national pride.

Her story resonates beyond boxing - it speaks of what happens when opportunity meets determination. "Every time I fight, I think of my family, my coaches and my country," she says. "I fight not for fame, but for pride - the pride of wearing the uniform and raising the flag." Her journey reminds every young Indian that dreams know no gender, and that the discipline of a soldier can turn raw talent into greatness.

As the sun sets over ASI's training grounds, the rhythmic sound of gloves hitting pads fills the air. Jaismine finishes her session, places her gloves down, and smiles - the calm confidence of a soldier who has fought, endured, and risen. "I'm just getting started," she says. "The best is yet to come." Naib Subedar Jaismine Lamboria - boxer, soldier, and symbol of India's fighting spirit - continues to inspire a nation that now believes every girl can be a champion.



Colonel Mohan Rao was commissioned into the SIKH LIGHT INFANTRY in September 2004.

He has tenanted important appointments such as Instructor at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, and a graded staff appointment in a Rashtriya Rifles Sector Headquarters. He commanded his unit along the Line of Control in Jammu & Kashmir. He has also played squash for India. Currently he is posted as the Commandant of Army Sports Institute, Pune.



Col Mohan Rao



# WING COMMANDER GITA CHANDA

## INDIA'S FIRST WOMAN PARATROOPER

Agra, 17th July 1959. History was about to be made for the country, and for military aviation in India. On

board a DC-3 Dakota aircraft, three instructor paratroopers and a special trainee were on the static line, awaiting the cue from the aircrew to make their para jump. As they got the "GO", the three instructors made their jump by turns. Then, it was the turn of the trainee, who made the jump into the vast void, leaping into history. The trainee was Flight Lieutenant (Dr) Gita Chanda, who became the first woman paratrooper in India. The jump was a culmination of rigorous mental and physical training, strict discipline, and most formidable, overcoming the prevalent belief that women cannot and should not be permitted to become paratroopers.

Flight Lieutenant Gita Chanda was no ordinary person. Born in Comilla city, in present day Bangladesh, into the family of Mr. Harendra Chandra, a lecturer at Carmichael College in Rangpur, she spent her childhood and teenage years in Rangpur. After the partition of the country in 1947, the family shifted to India. A keen sportsperson and a hardy outdoors person, Gita was also a brilliant student. She chose to pursue medicine and become a Doctor. On earning her medical degree, she opted to join the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the Medical Branch. Commissioned into the IAF as a Pilot Officer in November 1957, she was posted as a Medical Officer to Air Force Station Kalaikunda, near Kharagpur, in West Bengal.

Sometime in 1959, Air Headquarters sought volunteers from personnel of the Medical Branch of the IAF for training as paratroopers. Selected volunteers would undergo basic paratrooper training at Paratroopers Training School (PTS) at Agra.

None of the male medical professionals volunteered. Only Flight Lieutenant (Dr) Gita Chanda volunteered. Her



*Flight Lieutenant Gita Chanda in parajump gear, at the Paratroopers Training School, Agra*

surprised male colleagues advised her to avoid the option on some pretext or the other. It was not only her colleagues who were shocked and taken aback by her actions. Even hardened paratroopers were of the view that paratrooping was a dangerous task which could be performed only by hardened soldiers. Her detractors anticipated a quick retreat by her once she experienced the rigours of training. Flight Lieutenant (Dr) Chanda persisted and went ahead.

Meanwhile, Air Headquarters rejected Flight Lieutenant Chanda's application for paratrooper training. Not discouraged by this rejection, she travelled to Headquarters, and sought an appointment with Air Marshal Subroto Mukerjee, the first Indian Commander-in-Chief of the IAF. After hearing her case, Mukerjee was clear that she was rejected for being a woman. Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee not only gave the permission for her to undergo the training but also encouraged her in her endeavour.

Flight Lieutenant Chanda joined PTS, Agra in May 1959. In the scorching heat of the Agra summer, she was the

only woman to train with male paratroopers. Her initial training included 5-mile runs, followed by Physical Training routines and free hand exercises. The paratrooper training would commence only after finishing this regimen.

By July 1959, Gita Chanda had successfully met all the requirements to progress to the final stage of training, viz., actual parajumps from the air. Back then, Dakota aircraft were used for Paratrooper training. The aircraft would climb to 1000 feet, heading towards the designated Drop Zone (DZ). Once all the parameters for the drop were met, the aircrew would clear the paratroopers for the jump. As described earlier, on that historic day, the aircraft carried three para instructors and the only trainee, Flight Lieutenant Gita Chanda. And among the huge crowd of general public on the ground to witness her historic jump, the Defence Minister, Mr. VK Krishna Menon was reportedly present. On seeing her parachute open, and her subsequent landing on the DZ, the crowd was completely ecstatic. The jump gave a great boost to her self-confidence and determination.

Her second jump from the Dakota was just seven days later and unfortunately, in her second jump, there was a problem. As she jumped from the Dakota aircraft, her parachute got twisted and the ropes got entangled in knots. The parachute did not open the way it was meant to. Realizing that every second was precious, she remembered the words of her instructors and managed to twist and turn accordingly to make the parachute inflate in a way to land safely on the ground.

The experience of her second jump did not discourage her in any way. In the next few weeks, she made seven jumps, including one jump by night. On successfully completing the stipulated number of jumps, it was none other than



*Dakota Paradrop Representative Image (credit bharat-rakshak.com)*  
(Inset) Wing Commander Gita Chanda

Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee who honoured her with the Paratroopers' Badge.

Flight Lieutenant Gita Chanda, by her raw courage, hard work, persistence and determination challenged the prevalent mindset, to become the first woman paratrooper in the country, setting a precedent and opening doors for women to serve in the Armed Forces at par with male counterparts. In fact, her superior skill and competence as a paratrooper paved the way for her to be posted as an instructor at the PTS, where

she was responsible for imparting para training to selected personnel.

Gita Chanda was promoted to Squadron Leader in 1965 and retired from the IAF as a Wing Commander later. Her name faded from the mainstream narratives. Recent historiographical work and publications such as "Get Bengal" (2025) and archival references on Wikipedia now reaffirm her place as a trail blazer who became India's first woman paratrooper.



*Mr. Debadyuti Dasgupta is an extremely passionate military fiction writer and a military historian, with a Bachelor's degree in Mechanical Engineering. He has a Facebook page called "1971 War Book Series", documenting the 1971 war with incidents and accounts of the Eastern and the Western Front of the war. He has authored four books on the 1971 war. He is also a weapons enthusiast and is presently working on constructing E-vehicles. He has worked with the Corps of Engineers to create murals on the East Gate of Fort William, which were unveiled on 15 December 2021 marking the commencement of the "Swarnim Vijay Divas".*



**Mr. Debadyuti Dasgupta**



# HEROES ARE CAREFULLY CRAFTED

THE JUNOON OF  
LIEUTENANT P N DATT, AC (POSTHUMOUS)

In August 1997, Lieutenant Puneet Nath Datt of 1/11 Gorkha Rifles was posthumously awarded the Ashok Chakra, India's highest gallantry award in operations other than conventional war. In his unit, he became a living legend. The entire Battalion was mesmerised by the leadership influence of Lieutenant Puneet. This is the story of a highly motivated, passionate and valiant young officer.

We, 11 Gorkha Rifles, were now an **'Ashok Chakra Regiment'**, indeed a great honour that influences every soldier and officer to perform, achieve and try ever harder. I learnt of the sterling brave action of Lieutenant Puneet while I was posted at the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT). As things played out, in May 1998, I joined the First Eleven at Siachen Glacier as the Second-in-Command.

I was new to the Battalion and did not know the troops, officers and 'folklore' of the Battalion. I had heard about the gallant action of young and motivated Lieutenant Puneet, few months prior in Kashmir. In the Battalion I could feel the presence of Puneet. A kancha would say (to me) *'Puneet Saab le jasto gar thiye hola'* (Puneet Saab would probably have done it like this) and so I must too!! Puneet was in every mind, a model and as an inspiration. While doing the very gruelling Siachen Training you could hear *'na chhornu'* meaning do not give up, and to buttress that call of *'na chhornu'* many would invoke the strength and determination of Puneet. They had seen Puneet as an indefatigable young *'Bheem'* who could climb a rope *'first class'* like a walk in the park!!



*2nd Lieutenant Puneet Datt dons the 11 Gorkha Rifles uniform on commissioning from Indian Military Academy, Dehradun*



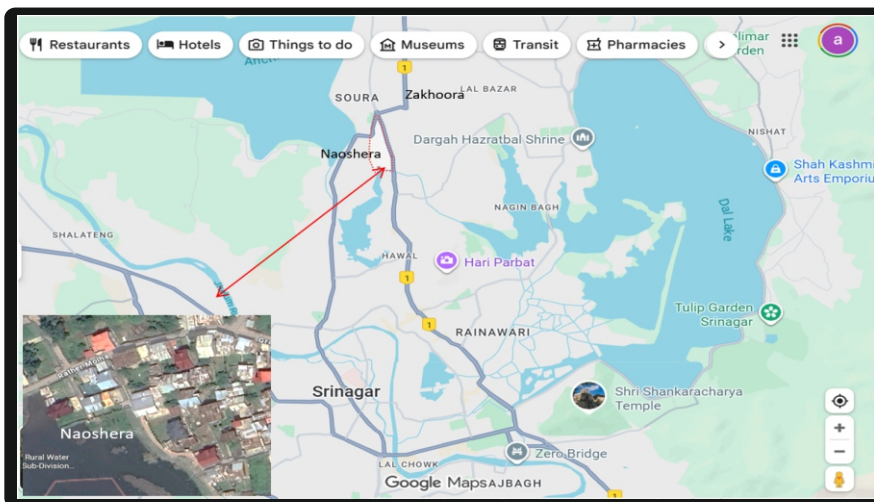
The Datt home is in Defence Colony, New Delhi. Defence Colony has named their wonderful central park after Lieutenant Puneet and they host a very well attended 'Shradhanjali Diwas' function every 20 July, to pay tribute to young Puneet. At this function, colleagues and friends share their thoughts. 2nd Lieutenant Vijay Joshi (now Colonel) who had passed out as the Tarzan of his course narrated an interesting anecdote, "when I joined the Unit on commissioning, I was super confident as I had won the admiration of the troops for my excellence at physical training etc. I was the Tarzan. Then Lieutenant Puneet rejoined the unit, back from the Commando Course, and I found that not I, but he was the idol of the troops. In my mind, I thought I am much younger and I am fresh from the Academy aur 'ham kissi se kam nabin'. And thus, a challenge round was fixed – First Class Rope Climbing at morning PT with a full audience of Alpha Company!! Next morning, he just climbed two parallel ropes as if he was taking a morning walk!!! I, the Tarzan of my IMA course, had to run for cover. I thought I could get away by offering a beer in the evening, but a teetotaler is even more difficult to placate. . . . and Lieutenant Vijay Joshi was found doing push-ups in the Bar!!"

'Sir, we were a great team', continued Vijay Joshi at the Shradhanjali Diwas. 'Puneet and I, we shared the same tiny room in a three floor building in Soura locality in downtown Srinagar, where A Company was housed. These were intense times and we all knew that anything could happen at any time. Between our two beds, there was a small peg-table. Instead of resting, Puneet would use every free moment and late night hours to draw maps and routes with his finger on this peg-table, like a 'Planning Map'. We would keep planning and discussing how to conduct operations, how to train the team, what the next possible situation could be and how to outwit the adversary. As if we were commanding the Srinagar Corps!! Ha Ha!!! Puneet seemed to have no thought for anything else. I was so inspired and found real value in these initial days of my Infantry Attachment to the First (I was commissioned into the ASC)'".

Lieutenant Puneet had developed intelligence inputs through his network of reliable sources. Colonel BK Choudhry, the Commanding Officer (CO) then crafted the plan along with Lieutenant Vijay Joshi, Captain Harbir Pannu, Lieutenant Puneet, the Adjutant Lieutenant JS Mundi and others. Teams were sent to cordon Noushera, a locality between Zadibal and Soura in Srinagar. Lieutenant Puneet was tasked to go from Zakhora (a nearby locality) right into the hornet's nest – and eliminate the terrorists holed up in a stone house. It was a three-storey house with a large lawn in front, a marsh behind, and a smaller house to a side.

The Inner Cordon team under Lieutenant Puneet engaged the house with rockets, grenades and automatic machine gun fire. The terrorists were well fortified and continued to hold out. Despite the intense fire from the terrorists, Puneet closed in to the house and placed an explosive charge on the wall which created a huge gap in the wall. Instantly Puneet entered and got into a

fire-fight, downing one terrorist who was attempting to escape. The other terrorists moved to the rear of the house, and Puneet along with Havildar Dev Prakash started to place another explosive – a very precarious action as it directly exposed them to terrorists' fire. While placing the explosive, Puneet sensed some activity behind a tin sheet door. He fired an accurate burst from his rifle and eliminated two more terrorists. Another terrorist from a hidden position fired a burst of bullets, and a bullet hit Puneet in the jaw exiting through his neck. All the terrorists were neutralised and a huge cache of arms, ammunition and explosives was recovered. The leadership of the local terrorist network was finished in this operation, a very significant success. But Puneet had succumbed to the fatal gunshot wound. In the tradition of his proud ancestors, the fearless and brave Mohyal (Brahmin) warriors, Puneet heroically delivered on his promise: 'Death Before Dishonour', to his mother, his father and to himself.



Map of Area Naoshera



*Puneet in his cabin during the study period at NDA, Pune. Inset. Death Before Dishonour - A motto adopted from his Father Major Pramod Nath Datt, Hand Sketch by Puneet Datt*

A leader is made right from his lineage, his genes, his parenting, grooming, training and every-day leadership deeds. Leadership is an innate quality, and colleagues and friends all remember him as an inspiring leader. Every day in the Paltan at Siachen Glacier, I would uncover another little nugget about Lieutenant Puneet.

On one such day it was Lieutenant Manoj Kumar Pandey, later PVC (Posthumous). In Siachen I was training the lead team for a cliff assault. It was a most gruelling climb on a sheer rock face. It took us four times the effort that we estimated based on our practice sessions. In a moment of absolute fatigue, catching his breath, Lieutenant Manoj answered ‘Sir, you did not know Puneet and you are new to the First, hence you ask this question. Sir, I was there in the Noushera operation with Lieutenant Puneet (pause) and you know sir, it is I who eventually picked up the body of my hero, Lieutenant Puneet’ . . . . . “aur aisa kabhi ho sakta hai that any one from his (Puneet’s) team will not volunteer for any impossible task!! No sir, I swear I will never let him down”. I understood the

depth of his words; Lieutenant Manoj endured by my side in many a challenge at Siachen, and even more so in the 1999 Kargil War, where I tasked him for responsibilities well beyond his mere two-year Lieutenant’s service. And as he said to me on that rock cliff in August 1998, ***I will never let him down Sir***, Lieutenant Manoj fulfilled his unsaid promise to Lieutenant Puneet – he too scaled the pinnacle of courage! That was the enduring presence of Lieutenant Puneet in the very fibre of his Battalion, in every heart and every mind.

Puneet continues to inspire—both those who knew him and those who have only heard his deeds. His course-mates who fought in Kargil, just two years after his martyrdom, recall how they paused before every daunting mission and asked themselves, “What would Puneet have done?” Captain Manoj Pandey, in a letter to his parents shortly before his own valiant sacrifice at Kargil, told his parents that his regimental senior, Puneet, was his inspiration (the letter is displayed in our Regimental Museum).

Puneet had a larger than life influence on a vast cross-section of youngsters, soldiers and even seniors; in fact, even amongst the fraternity of the unit ladies. In keeping with Unit traditions, the youngsters would ‘unexpectedly’ call on the senior officers at home, devour all there was to eat and clean up the refrigerator as well. It was always a joy for the seniors and the youngsters alike. But it did put a strain on the lady of the house. Puneet would carry some eggs, potatoes and ready-made snacks to help the ‘raided’ household to alleviate the quandary of the lady of the house. The compassion Puneet had for everyone, be it his soldiers or even for the ladies was a mark of true leadership.

Both Puneet and Manoj figure in the ‘motivational’ talks that I deliver regularly to youngsters at schools, colleges, NCC gatherings and the like. When I show the slide that says ‘**Death Before Dishonour**’ they question me “Sir, what exactly does it imply”? As a young boy, Puneet had etched the motto of his father ‘Death Before Dishonour’ deep into his soul. He wrote it on a plaque displayed on his table, in his note-books and in his scribbles in class as well. He was already a hero when he wrote these words in his early formative years.



appointment as Cadet Sergeant Major rather than squeal the name of his junior (Cadet Kartik Murthy) for having drawn a particular cartoon sketch that had attracted the ire of the Academy Adjutant. Puneet always stood up for what he believed was right, whatever the cost. He was always ready with a solution-often an unconventional one-for any challenge. Even as a young cadet, he never hesitated to lead from the front. Yet what his course-mates remember most vividly is his kindness - staying back when everyone else had left to cheer a struggling course-mate or doing extra laps at the pool, sparring a few more rounds with a senior who needed the practice, or cracking a joke to lift someone's spirits on a bad day. Puneet planned, trained, motivated and inspired his Echo Squadron to victory in the most coveted cross-country event – not once, not twice but for three successive terms to achieve the first such hat-trick for any squadron in the history of NDA.

With intense training, crafty planning and secretive reconnaissance, Lieutenant Puneet led his Kohima Company to victory in the Golden Ring 'Josh-run' at Indian Military Academy (IMA), Dehradun. Captain Atulya Solankey (later Lieutenant General), an Instructor at the IMA, saw the exceptional leadership qualities of Puneet, and wanted him to join his Regiment, the 11 Gorkha Rifles. It was providence, since Puneet had promised his father that he would join 1/11 Gorkha Rifles. In fact, right from his days at the NDA, he proudly displayed the 11 Gorkha Rifles crest on his study table and his notebooks – he aspired for 1/11 Gorkhas and none other. And so with his sterling performance, Puneet fulfilled his 'word' to his father and proudly joined the First.

Puneet was a conscientious reader and had dug out the best military history books while at the NDA and IMA. Using every

possible spare minute to read, Puneet would study great military leaders and their campaigns. *"Puneet would talk of gallant actions of military leaders while drawing up shrewd plans to outwit the adversaries"*, recalls Colonel Vijay Joshi.

Yes, heroes are not made in a day. A soldier does not have to die to be acknowledged as a hero. In the making of every 'hero' there is a mother, like Mrs Anita Datt, who despite having lost her caring husband, endured her tears to make her son principled, tough and robust. Puneet stoically overcame the tragic demise of his father while in the Second Term at NDA, Pune. He became a pillar of strength for his mother, younger sister and the entire extended family. He was already a hero for his mother and his sister when he swore that he would make the house for the family. The influence of his father, Major Pramod Nath Datt, a gallant and highly respected officer of 1/11 Gorkha Rifles remained the most prominent factor in

Puneets' life and inspired him determinedly to join only his father's own unit. His *Nanaji*, Colonel SNC Bakshi, was also a powerful inspiration for little Puneet, and *Nanaji* would take him to his unit to play around a cannon on display. Colonel Bakshi had a very deep bond with his grandson and became the family's pillar of support when Major Pramod Datt sadly expired in 1994.

Puneet remains an omniscient hero to his family, his sister Divya and mother as they relate many a good fortune to be 'coincidentally' orchestrated by his divine intervention. In May 2025, Mrs Datt wanted to visit her daughter at Kenya and booked her seat, but she would go only if her brother could accompany her. Well, that did not work out and the plan would have to be cancelled. But the family still believed that Puneet would somehow magically intervene and make it possible. As things turned out, at the last moment, I



*Shradhanjali Divas at the Lieutenant Puneet Datt Park, Defence Colony, New Delhi*





Left Photo. Major Pramod Nath Datt, Puneet's father. Centre. Bust of Lieutenant P N Datt, AC (Posthumous) being prepared. Right. Childhood photo of Puneet wearing his father's Gorkha Hat.

was tasked to go to Kenya with a team of five engineers. We had to board the very same flight! And thus Mrs Datt could travel in comfort! On another occasion, the family was having a *havan* for their new home, and as they said the initial mantras, the bell rang. A photographer stood at the door to present the family a framed portrait of Puneet, a photograph he had clicked a few years earlier. He had read about Puneet's valient sacrifice, made a portrait and on that day, decided to visit the family on his own! Just providence!! Many such 'coincidences' were narrated by Mrs Anita Datt and the family firmly believes in the divine intervention of Lieutenant Puneet who continues to fulfil his promise to look after his mother.

Puneet's sister, Ms Divya writes "When he left, newspapers carried his pictures for days-his childhood photo wearing his father's Gorkha hat- captured the imagination of the nation. Strangers who had never met him wrote ballads and letters to our mother, saying how they were profoundly inspired. A team of

doctors from the US reached out, requesting to hold health camps in his memory. Priests contacted the family, wanting to conduct havans and prayers in his name-one continues to do so every year on his martyrdom day. Young boys and girls wrote that they would follow his footsteps to serve the nation; a young man appeared at our home years later, wearing the IMA uniform, saying he had waited to don the uniform before meeting Puneet's family. For our mother, he reveals his watchful care in the simplest ways: an auto appearing just when she is tired during a walk, or a friend calling with plans to visit the very place she had been thinking about. For all his family members - including his niece and nephew and my own son and daughter, who never met him- he is a symbol of courage, kindness, and large-hearted grace - constantly inspiring them to be a better person".

His uniform and his men were his pride. His face would light up at the sight of a Gorkha hat, and he proudly persuaded his juniors to join the 11 Gorkha Rifles too. He once told his family, "I can't describe the thrill I feel when I exchange salutes with my Gorkha men. I never want to retire."

**And he never did.**



Brigadier Amul Asthana (Retd) was commissioned into 11 Gorkha Rifles in 1981 and was the Officiating Commanding Officer and Second in Command of the "**Bravest of the Brave**" 1/11 GR in **Operation Meghdoot** and in **Operation Vijay** in 1998 - 1999. The battalions' saga of operations spanned a huge area, with numerous challenging ridge lines. Besides his service with the unit, he has been an Instructor at Infantry School, Mhow and served with WARDEC, the Wargaming Centre of ARTRAC. He commanded the 11 Gorkha Rifles Regimental Centre in Lucknow and retired in 2015 after 34 years in what he calls '**the most exciting career in the world**'.

Currently he is working as "Vice President Projects" with Zen Technologies Limited and doing development projects in military training systems, simulators and war gaming.



**Brigadier  
Amul Asthana**



Colonel David Devasabayam (Retd) with Major General Kartik Sesbadi, Division Commander (standing centre left and right) with their families at Amritsar

# FIND WELLNESS IN BREAKING YOUR ROUTINE

Dr Renuka David tells us how breaking the monotony restores the body, mind, and heart.

It is amazing how life has a way of settling into patterns. Think morning alarms, commutes, deadlines, chores, and the slow, predictable rhythm of everyday responsibilities. For the most part, routines are good for us. They anchor us, keep our lives running smoothly, and help us build habits that maintain health and stability. But even the best well-structured routines can become stifling over a period of time. Studies show that monotony dampens creativity and leaves the body craving a reset.

I learned this recently during a trip to Amritsar, Punjab, a journey that was born not out of a need for luxury or long-winded planning, but from a simple desire to step out of the routine. I must confess that this trip became one of the most fulfilling experiences I have had recently. It taught me not only the value of a break, but also how profoundly restorative even a brief change of scenery can be for my family and I.

## My Journey Through Punjab: A Personal Reawakening

Punjab was not originally on my list for a much-needed getaway. But in hindsight, it couldn't have been more perfect. One of my friends had, for long, desired to visit the iconic Golden Temple and Wagah Border. When I ran it past my children, they were delighted to join us. What started as a conversation soon started taking shape as a vacation. A beautiful itinerary was planned with the local Army Formation, which was led by a good friend.

What struck me upon landing at Amritsar was the region's vibrant energy, food, culture, spiritual warmth, and

the sheer generosity of its people, which made every moment meaningful. One of the delights I still think about is the simple joy of biting into a perfectly crisp, buttery *Amritsari kulcha*. I had tasted *kulchas* before, of course, but nothing prepares you for the real thing - the crackle of the crust, the soft centre, the spices dancing in perfect harmony. The *lassi* and warm *jalebis* added to the indulgence. It felt a guilty pleasure, and yes, we threw caution to the wind, because for once, we weren't counting calories or portion sizes. Instead, we focused on walking, getting in our steps across bustling markets, peaceful courtyards, and heritage monuments. The activity balanced out the treats, and the freedom from self-imposed restrictions felt incredibly refreshing.

Our visit to the Golden Temple was the emotional centre-piece of the trip. In an unexpected highlight, we decided, on a spontaneous whim, to get ourselves gorgeous handmade *phulkari dupattas* with matching *Patiala sahwars*, all of which were stitched in less than six hours! An unbelievable feat, I must say! It started as a small idea, but the process of choosing fabrics, comparing colours, laughing over measurements, and imagining the finished outfits created a memory etched in time. Wearing them during the temple visit made it feel even more symbolic, like we had woven ourselves into the tapestry of the place. It's a moment preserved not just in photographs, but in the emotional archive of my heart. We just lived the moment. Of course, the dramatic change of guard at the Wagah Border made us feel incredibly proud and patriotic, touching an emotional chord in everyone present. The breakup dinner with



*The ladies in colourful attire in Amritsar, with Dr Renuka donning a stunning Phulkari*

family and close friends was an evening filled with games, banter and laughter. We had an unforgettable holiday, which will be etched in our minds forever as a very happy memory!

### Powerful Takeaways

1. **The Power of Stepping Away From Routine.** A vacation, no matter how short or simple, is more than an escape. It is a recalibration. When we temporarily step away from monotony, several things happen:

- **The mind resets.** Novel experiences stimulate parts of the brain that routine activity leaves dormant, improving cognition and emotional flexibility.
- **Stress hormones drop.** Being in a new environment, even if it's just a nearby town, reduces cortisol levels.
- **The body relaxes.** Physical tension accumulated over weeks or months begins to dissipate as we shift out of "task mode."
- **Mood improves.** Breaks trigger dopamine release, the feel-good neurotransmitter tied to pleasure, enjoyment and motivation.
- **Perspective widens.** Distance from daily life often brings clarity to issues that

once felt overwhelming. Vacations aren't merely indulgences. They are maintenance for mental, physical, and emotional health.

2. **Family Bonding:** The Hidden Wellness Benefit. Travelling with family brought its own kind of healing. When life is dominated by responsibilities, family interactions often become transactional and we focus on coordination rather than connection. But during the trip, we rediscovered the joy of simply being together. We talked more, laughed more, shared meals without rushing, and allowed ourselves to be present with one another. Small stressful moments were dealt with ease

and banter. I also realised that when the end objective is to be happy and have a wonderful holiday, little effort is required to tide over difficult situations. My husband stresses on our secret tagline... '*All for one and one for all!*' Studies show that shared experiences strengthen emotional ties, build trust, and boost happiness hormones like oxytocin. I felt that deeply during this trip. It wasn't the grand gestures, but the small shared moments that refreshed our relationships.

3. **Physical and Emotional Benefits of a Break.** Taking a break from monotony, even a short one, creates a domino effect of wellness benefits:

### Physical Benefits

- Reduced muscle tension from stress
- More consistent movement (travel often involves lots of natural walking)
- Better sleep due to mental relaxation (and in most cases, physical exhaustion).
- Stronger immunity as cortisol levels decrease
- A boost in energy once the body is out of the fatigue cycles.

### Emotional Benefits

- Renewed motivation and creativity
- Improved mood and optimism
- Emotional cleansing from a shift in environment
- Stronger family connections
- Increased resilience when returning to routine



Even indulgent eating during vacations can coexist with well-being, especially when balanced with activity. In Punjab, our days were active enough that the food felt like fuel rather than guilt. Trust me, it felt divine.

### How to Vacation When Time, Money, or Logistics Are Limited

One of the biggest myths about wellness is that it requires major investments such as time off work, luxurious travel, or elaborate planning. But the essence of a break is not luxury; it is change. Here are practical ways to refresh yourself even under constraints:

- **Take micro-breaks.** A weekend getaway, a single-day trip, or even an afternoon spent differently can reset your mind.
- **Travel nearby.** Explore towns, heritage sites, nature trails, or cultural hubs close to home.
- **Change your routine without going anywhere.** Visit a museum, spend a day at a botanical garden, try a new restaurant, or attend a local event.
- **Plan low-budget adventures.** Public transport, budget stays, or staying with relatives can make travel affordable.
- **Use slow travel.** Fewer activities, more depth-low cost, low stress, high impact.
- **Integrate wellness practices.** Walking in a nature reserve close by or waking up early to watch a sunrise can all be part of a mini-retreat.
- **Make it meaningful.** It could be aspirational (such as visiting the Golden Temple), creative (engaging in photography), bonding-oriented (like our experience with the *Patiala salwars* with family and friends) or rejuvenating (breakup dinner with lots of laughter). The value lies not in the extravagance but in the shift from the ordinary.



(Image Credit <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/importance-disconnecting-from-daily-routine-taking-break-kebanna-bcc9f>)

### Finding the Balance Between Routine And Breaks

Routine is the backbone of stability, but the breaks are the breath that keeps it alive. Too much routine leads to burnout and stagnation. Too much unpredictability leads to chaos and stress. A balanced life adopts the rhythm of consistency punctuated by deliberate pauses. Wellness through vacations should not be a rigid formula. It needs to be fluid, adaptable, collective and deeply personal. It can be found in small joys, unexpected moments, and shared laughter. It lives in the spaces between responsibilities, waiting for us

to create room for it.

When I returned home, I wasn't just refreshed, I was more present. My routine felt lighter, my mind clearer, and my heart fuller. That's the power of stepping away, even briefly. It doesn't take you away from your life, it just reconnects you to yourself. It doesn't matter whether you are in your 60s, 70s, 80s or even in your 90s. Cheers to your happiness and inner joy. That's a choice in your hands. **Make it happen. Occasionally, step away from your routine. Try it, and trust me, it works!**



*Dr Renuka David, MBBS, PGD (MCH), USA-PhD (HC) is the Managing Director of Radiant Medical Services and an alumnus of the Coimbatore Medical College. She has been a frontier doctor, working extensively with women and young adults in urban, rural and tribal India. She has also been a contract doctor with the Indian Army for three years. Dr Renuka dons many avatars as an entrepreneur, doctor, professional speaker, television show host, TEDx speaker and wellness expert. She is the Founder-Curator of the immensely successful Radiant Wellness Conclave.*



**Dr.Renuka David**

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# GENERATING REGULAR CASHFLOWS

## USING SYSTEMATIC WITHDRAWAL PLANS

Systematic Withdrawal Plans (SWPs) can transform a mutual fund corpus into a steady, tax efficient income stream that complements traditional income products, but they must be used thoughtfully because returns are market linked and capital is not guaranteed. This article explains how SWPs work, who they suit, their advantages and downsides, and how different portfolio designs can sustain withdrawals over time.

### Why Regular Cashflow Planning Matters

For many Indian households, salary or business income stops well before expenses do, especially for private sector retirees, professionals with irregular earnings, and families supporting elders with healthcare needs. Longer life expectancy, modest pension coverage and rising medical and lifestyle costs make it critical to convert accumulated savings into reliable, inflation aware cashflows.

Traditional income options-bank fixed deposits, government bonds, Post Office Monthly Income Scheme (POMIS), Senior Citizens' Savings Scheme (SCSS) and corporate deposits-provide comfort through fixed interest and perceived safety, but their post tax returns often struggle to beat inflation over long periods. Rate resets, caps on investment amounts and limited liquidity further constrain their ability to fund a multi decade retirement comfortably.

### What is an SWP?

A SWP is a facility that allows investors to withdraw a fixed amount or fixed units at regular intervals-monthly, quarterly or annually-from an existing mutual fund investment. On each withdrawal date, a calculated number of units is redeemed and the proceeds are credited to the investor's bank account, while the remaining units stay invested and continue to participate in market movements.



Unlike redeeming the entire corpus at one go, an SWP converts a lump sum into a structured income stream, making it especially useful in the “distribution” phase of life-post retirement, during career breaks, or when business cashflows are uneven. The investor can typically choose the withdrawal amount, frequency and start date, and can modify or stop the SWP as circumstances change.

### Who Should Consider SWPs?

SWPs are particularly relevant for:

- Retirees from private sector or small businesses who need to generate a monthly “*pension like*” income from their accumulated corpus;
- Families with financial dependants or elders whose regular medical and living costs must be met with predictable cashflows;
- Professionals and business owners with volatile income who want a stabilising income line to cover fixed household expenses;

They can also be useful for individuals planning ahead-artists, freelancers or those in cyclical industries-who may not have employer sponsored pensions and must self create retirement income solutions.

### Why Mutual Funds for SWP?

Mutual funds offer professional management, diversification across asset classes, relatively low transaction costs and easy online execution, making them a practical vehicle for SWP based income. Investors can start with relatively modest amounts, deploy capital across equity, debt and hybrid schemes, and fine tune the risk–return profile to match their stage of life and risk appetite.

Compared with locking money fully into fixed rate instruments, keeping a portion of the corpus in market linked funds gives it a chance to grow faster than inflation, especially over long horizons. This combination of liquidity, growth potential and convenience makes mutual funds a strong candidate for building and drawing down a retirement corpus through SWPs.

### Designing an SWP: The Bucket Approach

A practical way to plan an SWP is to split the corpus into three “buckets”: equity, debt and hybrid funds.

- **Equity funds:** Aim for higher long term growth, helping the corpus keep pace with or beat inflation.
- **Debt funds:** Provide stability and liquidity to meet near term withdrawals with lower volatility.
- **Hybrid funds:** Blend equity and debt, smoothing return patterns while still offering growth potential.

The monthly SWP amount is set after estimating essential expenses and desired lifestyle, and then matching that requirement with a portfolio whose expected long term return comfortably exceeds the withdrawal rate. In practice, annual withdrawal rates of around 4–6% of corpus are usually considered more sustainable for equity heavy portfolios, assuming reasonable long term returns.

### How the Three Model Options Illustrate SWPs

Please find below the three illustrative options for a ₹50 lakh corpus, with a 6% annual withdrawal over 10 years, invested in different mixes of large cap equity and hybrid funds.

**Option 1:** 100% in large cap equity funds at an assumed 14% return shows the

highest ending value-around ₹1.07 crore after a decade of withdrawals-highlighting how a growth oriented allocation can not only sustain income but also build wealth.

Allocation : 100% Equity				
Large Cap	Amount	Allocation	10 Yr Returns	Wt Avg Returns
Canara Robeco Large Cap	1250000	0.25	14.45%	4%
ABSL Large Cap	1250000	0.25	13.20%	3%
Nippon Large Cap	1250000	0.25	14.88%	4%
Bandhan Large Cap Fund	1250000	0.25	13.59%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5000000</b>			<b>14%</b>

Retirement Corpus Calculation	
Total Corpus in 2015	₹ 50,00,000
Rate of Return *	14%
Withdrawal Rate	6%

Withdrawal Breakup Schedule					
Year	Corpus at the Beginning of the Year	Income Per Year at 14%*	Corpus before Withdrawal (End of the Year)	Withdrawal Amount Per Year at 6%*	Corpus after withdrawal (End of the Year)
2015	₹ 50,00,000	₹ 7,01,500	₹ 57,01,500	₹ 3,42,090	₹ 53,59,410
2016	₹ 53,59,410	₹ 7,51,925	₹ 61,11,335	₹ 3,66,680	₹ 57,44,655
2017	₹ 57,44,655	₹ 8,05,975	₹ 65,50,630	₹ 3,93,038	₹ 61,57,592
2018	₹ 61,57,592	₹ 8,63,910	₹ 70,21,503	₹ 4,21,290	₹ 66,00,212
2019	₹ 66,00,212	₹ 9,26,010	₹ 75,26,222	₹ 4,51,573	₹ 70,74,649
2020	₹ 70,74,649	₹ 9,92,573	₹ 80,67,222	₹ 4,84,033	₹ 75,83,189
2021	₹ 75,83,189	₹ 10,63,921	₹ 86,47,110	₹ 5,18,827	₹ 81,28,284
2022	₹ 81,28,284	₹ 11,40,398	₹ 92,68,682	₹ 5,56,121	₹ 87,12,561
2023	₹ 87,12,561	₹ 12,22,372	₹ 99,34,933	₹ 5,96,096	₹ 93,38,837
2024	₹ 93,38,837	₹ 13,10,239	₹ 1,06,49,076	₹ 6,38,945	₹ 1,00,10,132
2025	₹ 1,00,10,132	₹ 14,04,421	₹ 1,14,14,553	₹ 6,84,873	₹ 1,07,29,680

**Option 2:** A 50:50 mix of equity and hybrid funds at an assumed 13% return ends with roughly ₹1.01 crore, reflecting a more balanced risk–return profile suitable for moderate investors.

50% Hybrid & 50% Equity				
Equity & Hybrid	Amount	Allocation	10 Yr Returns	Wt Avg Returns
Canara Robeco Large Cap	1250000	0.25	14.45%	4%
Kotak Equity Savings Fund	1250000	0.25	13.59%	2%
HDFC BAF	1250000	0.25	14.37%	3%
ABSL BAF	1250000	0.25	11.42%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5000000</b>			<b>13%</b>

Retirement Corpus Calculation	
Total Corpus in 2015	₹ 50,00,000
Rate of Return *	13%
Withdrawal Rate	6%

Source : Morning Star

WITHDRAWAL BREAKUP SCHEDULE					
Year	Corpus at the Beginning of the Year	Income Per Year at 13%*	Corpus before Withdrawal (End of the Year)	Withdrawal Amount Per Year at 6%*	Corpus after withdrawal (End of the Year)
2015	₹50,00,000	₹6,72,875	₹56,72,875	₹3,40,373	₹53,32,503
2016	₹53,32,503	₹7,17,622	₹60,50,124	₹3,63,007	₹56,87,117
2017	₹56,87,117	₹7,65,344	₹64,52,460	₹3,87,148	₹60,65,313
2018	₹60,65,313	₹8,16,239	₹68,81,552	₹4,12,893	₹64,68,659
2019	₹64,68,659	₹8,70,520	₹73,39,179	₹4,40,351	₹68,98,828
2020	₹68,98,828	₹9,28,410	₹78,27,238	₹4,69,634	₹73,57,604
2021	₹73,57,604	₹9,90,150	₹83,47,753	₹5,00,865	₹78,46,888
2022	₹78,46,888	₹10,55,995	₹89,02,883	₹5,34,173	₹83,68,710
2023	₹83,68,710	₹11,26,219	₹94,94,929	₹5,69,696	₹89,25,233
2024	₹89,25,233	₹12,01,113	₹1,01,26,347	₹6,07,581	₹95,18,766
2025	₹95,18,766	₹12,80,988	₹1,07,99,754	₹6,47,985	₹1,01,51,768



**Option 3:** A conservative structure with 20% equity and 80% hybrid at an assumed 11% return ends near ₹76 lakh, emphasising capital preservation and lower volatility while still supporting regular withdrawals.

80% Hybrid & 20% Equity				
Equity & Hybrid	Amount	Allocation	10 Yr Returns	Wt Avg Returns
Canara Robeco Large Cap	1000000	0.2	14.45%	3%
Kotak Equity Savings Fund	1000000	0.2	9.58%	2%
HDFC BAF	1500000	0.3	9.58%	3%
ABSL BAF	1500000	0.3	9.58%	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5000000</b>			<b>11%</b>

Retirement Corpus Calculation	
Total Corpus in 2015	₹ 50,00,000
Rate of Return *	11%
Withdrawal Rate	6%

WITHDRAWAL BREAKUP SCHEDULE					
Year	Corpus at the Beginning of the Year	Income Per Year at 11%*	Corpus before Withdrawal (End of the Year)	Withdrawal Amount Per Year at 6%*	Corpus after withdrawal (End of the Year)
2015	₹ 50,00,000	₹ 5,27,700	₹ 55,27,700	₹ 3,31,662	₹ 51,96,038
2016	₹ 51,96,038	₹ 5,48,390	₹ 57,44,428	₹ 3,44,666	₹ 53,99,762
2017	₹ 53,99,762	₹ 5,69,891	₹ 59,69,653	₹ 3,58,179	₹ 56,11,474
2018	₹ 56,11,474	₹ 5,92,235	₹ 62,03,709	₹ 3,72,223	₹ 58,31,486
2019	₹ 58,31,486	₹ 6,15,455	₹ 64,46,941	₹ 3,86,816	₹ 60,60,125
2020	₹ 60,60,125	₹ 6,39,586	₹ 66,99,710	₹ 4,01,983	₹ 62,97,728
2021	₹ 62,97,728	₹ 6,64,662	₹ 69,62,390	₹ 4,17,743	₹ 65,44,647
2022	₹ 65,44,647	₹ 6,90,722	₹ 72,35,369	₹ 4,34,122	₹ 68,01,247
2023	₹ 68,01,247	₹ 7,17,804	₹ 75,19,050	₹ 4,51,143	₹ 70,67,907
2024	₹ 70,67,907	₹ 7,45,947	₹ 78,13,854	₹ 4,68,831	₹ 73,45,023
2025	₹ 73,45,023	₹ 7,75,194	₹ 81,20,216	₹ 4,87,213	₹ 76,33,003

These scenarios underline two key ideas: long term equity exposure is important to fight inflation, and the choice of option must match the investor's risk tolerance and familiarity with market volatility.

### Benefits of SWPs

**Regular, Customisable Income.** SWPs replicate a pension by providing scheduled payouts that can be aligned with monthly household budgets, school fees, EMIs or medical costs. Frequency and amount are flexible, which allows investors to increase, decrease or pause withdrawals if circumstances change. Because the residual corpus stays invested, there is potential for capital appreciation even as income is drawn, provided the long term portfolio return exceeds the withdrawal rate. This is a key advantage over fixed products that may offer stable interest but little scope for real (inflation adjusted) growth.

**Potential to Beat Inflation.** When SWPs are backed by a portfolio with meaningful equity exposure, the corpus can grow over time despite regular redemptions, helping the investor maintain purchasing power in the face of rising prices. This is particularly important in India, where inflation in living and healthcare costs can significantly erode fixed nominal incomes over a 20 to 30 year retirement. Hybrid and large cap equity funds, managed with a disciplined asset allocation framework, can offer a balance between volatility and long term growth, making them strong candidates for the "growth bucket" of an SWP strategy.

**Behavioural and Practical Advantages.** By formalising withdrawals, SWPs impose financial discipline and give clarity on how long the corpus may last under different assumptions. Investors are less tempted to make ad hoc redemptions or speculative timing decisions, because there is a pre agreed structure. Operationally, once the instruction is set up, the process is largely automated, with credits arriving in the investor's bank account on schedule without manual redemption each month. This makes SWPs especially convenient for older investors or those not comfortable with frequent market transactions.

**Tax Treatment and Efficiency.** For mutual funds, each SWP instalment is treated as a redemption, and only the capital gain component within that withdrawal is taxable; the part representing a return of original capital is not taxed. Over time, this can be more tax efficient than earning fully taxable interest on bank FDs, especially for investors in higher tax brackets. In equity oriented funds, long term capital gains above the prevailing annual exemption are taxed at a concessional rate, while for debt funds current rules tax gains at slab rates, but still only on the gain component of each withdrawal. There is typically no tax deducted at source on SWP payouts in Mutual Funds, so investors receive the full credited amount and handle tax at filing time.

### Risks and Limitations of SWPs

#### Market and Sequence of returns

**Risk.** Unlike guaranteed pension products or government small savings schemes,

SWPs are fully exposed to market risk—the NAV fluctuates daily, and a prolonged downturn at the wrong time can hurt both income and corpus. Poor returns in the early years of retirement (negative “sequence of returns”) can be especially damaging because withdrawals lock in losses on a larger corpus. This risk can be managed but not eliminated, by:

- Keeping 2–3 years of withdrawals parked in lower volatility debt or liquid funds.
- Gradually reducing equity exposure as age advances or as goals are met.
- Avoiding sharply increasing SWP amounts after a market rally.

**Risk of Over Withdrawal and Corpus Depletion.** If the withdrawal rate is set too high relative to realistic long term return expectations, the investor may start eroding principal rapidly, especially during weak markets. Frequent top ups in withdrawal amount to meet lifestyle inflation without a corresponding portfolio review can also accelerate depletion. The illustrative 6% withdrawal in your options is reasonable when paired with double digit expected returns and significant equity allocation, but investors with lower risk portfolios may need to work with lower withdrawal rates or accept the possibility of a shrinking corpus.

**Monitoring and Behaviour Risk.** SWPs are not “set and forget” products. The underlying portfolio needs periodic review for:

- Fund performance versus category.
- Asset allocation drift due to market moves.
- Changes in tax rules or personal circumstances.

Without such oversight-ideally with professional advice-investors may unintentionally carry more risk than they can handle, or remain stuck in

underperforming schemes while continuing to withdraw.

### Comparing SWPs with Traditional Income Products

Compared with FDs and similar fixed income products, SWPs:

- Offer greater flexibility in withdrawal amounts and timing, with no fixed lock-in in most open ended funds.
- Provide better tax treatment on long term equity gains and only tax the gains portion of each withdrawal, whereas FD interest is fully taxable at slab rate.
- Carry higher risk, since neither returns nor capital are guaranteed, and income can fluctuate if the corpus value falls.

For many investors, the most sensible approach is not “SWP or FD” but “SWP and FD”; maintaining a core safety layer in guaranteed schemes while using SWPs from mutual funds to provide inflation beating income and growth potential.

### Conclusion:

#### A Modern, Market linked Pension

SWPs in Mutual Funds offer a contemporary way to convert savings into a customised, potentially inflation beating income stream, especially valuable for retirees, self employed individuals and families seeking structured cashflows. They sit between the safety of traditional fixed income products and the growth potential of market linked assets, combining regular payouts, flexibility and tax advantages with the discipline of a formal withdrawal plan.

However, SWPs are not guaranteed products: they carry market risk, require prudent withdrawal rates and demand periodic review of both portfolio and cashflow needs. Used thoughtfully-ideally with professional guidance and a clear asset allocation framework-SWPs can become a powerful pillar of a long term retirement and income strategy for Indian investors.



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**Babu Krishnamoorthy**

# INDIA AND THE FRACTURED GLOBAL ORDER

As somebody who spent nearly three decades at the United Nations extolling the virtues of globalisation and multilateralism and their unifying power, I confess to finding myself considerably less sanguine about their prospects today. The world we inhabit-fluid, fragmented, and fraught with strategic competition-bears little resemblance to the optimistic post-Cold War order that once promised a global consciousness, where the tragedies of our time would be recognised as universal in origin and reach, and tackling them would be a collective responsibility assumed by us all. Today, that promise strains under unprecedented pressures, and **we stand at an inflexion point in human history where the old certainties have crumbled whilst the contours of a new order remain stubbornly indistinct.**

The post-war international system, established in the aftermath of two world wars, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima, was neither unchallengeable nor immutable. It was a construct of its time, shaped by the exigencies of Cold War rivalry and the promise of liberal democracy. For decades, this system-anchored by American leadership, multilateral institutions, and a commitment to free trade-delivered unprecedented prosperity and relative stability. Yet it was the presidency of Donald Trump that truly accelerated its unravelling. His embrace of ultranationalism, disdain for multilateral institutions, and aggressive trade policies marked a sharp departure from the bipartisan tradition of American globalism. Trump's administration viewed the post-war system not as a legacy to uphold, but as a liability to be discarded whenever it impeded narrowly defined national interests.

The consequences have been profound and far-reaching. By undermining the very institutions that once projected American influence-the United Nations, the World Trade



Top. Bharat Mandapam in Pragati Maidan during the G20 Summit in New Delhi on September 06, 2023 (credit [www.pib.gov.in](http://www.pib.gov.in)) Bottom. BRICS member states during the 17th BRICS Summit at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on July 6, 2025 (credit [www.pib.gov.in](http://www.pib.gov.in))

Organisation, NATO-Washington opened the door for alternative visions of global governance. Beijing, long wary of American dominance, seized the opportunity to recast itself as a defender of multilateralism and stability. Chinese President Xi Jinping has repeatedly emphasised the need to "safeguard the authority of the United Nations" and promote "inclusive economic globalisation"-a rhetorical pivot that positions China as a responsible stakeholder in contrast to Washington's perceived belligerence. Xi's message resonates more strongly today than it might have a decade ago, particularly amongst developing nations weary of being buffeted by decisions made in Washington and Beijing rather than being empowered to shape their own destinies.

## The New Geopolitical Reality

We are not returning to the bipolar standoff of the twentieth century. Instead, we are entering a more fluid and contested phase-one where power is diffuse, partnerships are transactional, and legitimacy is up for grabs. In the global geopolitical landscape, certain developments have emerged that are reshaping international politics with extraordinary velocity.

**First**, there is a palpable backlash against globalisation in developed countries. The economic and cultural consequences of globalisation-job displacement, wage stagnation, and the erosion of traditional community structures-have sparked widespread discontent. This has manifested in populist movements, protectionist policies, and a retreat from international cooperation. The Trump administration's imposition of 50 per cent tariffs on Indian imports exemplifies this new reality, a stark reminder that even the most robust partnerships are vulnerable to a



populist leader's whims. The recent easing of US-China trade tensions, with Washington reducing tariffs on Chinese goods from 145 per cent to 30 per cent whilst China reciprocated by cutting tariffs from 125 per cent to 10 per cent, further demonstrates the transactional nature of contemporary great power relations-and incidentally threatens to undermine India's carefully cultivated "China Plus One" strategy.

The recent meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC Summit in Busan, South Korea, and Trump's use of the term "G2" to frame the gathering, has raised profound questions for India. Strategic calm between the U.S. and China may reduce global volatility, but it also demands sharper policy-making and diplomacy from us.

For years, New Delhi has operated on the foundational assumption that the U.S. would always view it as a *"useful instrument"* to constrain or counterbalance a rising China. The unspoken pact of the Indo-Pacific strategy - where India's geopolitical weight was seen as crucial to Washington's China strategy - has taken a major hit. The transactional nature of the Trump-Xi deal highlights a clear hierarchy of U.S. interests: for the Trump administration, the relationship with Beijing, driven by the colossal trade deficit and the desire for high-profile deals, remains far more important than the one with New Delhi. This is evident in the differential treatment: while a partial trade truce was quickly struck with China, the U.S. has continued to pressure India with tariffs, even as a bilateral deal with New Delhi is being negotiated. Indians have lost jobs as a result of US tariffs, while China is being hailed in Trump's social media posts.

The assumption that the U.S. would always have India's back is now obsolete.

New Delhi must recognize that its strategic value to Washington is conditional and subject to the vagaries of U.S. domestic politics and the immediate priority of managing the relationship with the peer competitor, China. This necessitates a profound and urgent recalibration of India's foreign policy assumptions. Our strategic options must revolve around maximizing strategic autonomy and building comprehensive national power.

**Second**, China's rise continues to reshape the global order. Its growing assertiveness in political, economic, and military domains challenges American primacy, whilst its Belt and Road Initiative has created new patterns of economic dependency across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. China has emerged as the largest arms supplier to Pakistan, accounting for 81 per cent of its arms imports between 2020 and 2024, with more than 85 per cent of Pakistan's defence equipment now being Chinese. This relationship has evolved from mere procurement to co-production to joint research and development, as well as operational collaboration (and real-time intelligence sharing) during **Operation Sindoor**, creating a formidable challenge for India's security calculus. We find ourselves confronting a two-front threat from China and Pakistan, with our military remaining resource-constrained, overstretched, and vulnerable despite recent modernisation efforts.

**Third**, and perhaps most consequentially, we are witnessing the emergence of new platforms for international cooperation, particularly amongst nations of the Global South. These countries are seeking greater representation in global governance

structures without necessarily aligning with traditional Western powers. This assertiveness reflects a justified frustration with the inequities embedded in post-war international architecture-from the exclusive Security Council that includes only five permanent members who fail to represent global geography adequately, to economic governance structures where the developed Global North remains openly non-adherent to environmental regulations whilst expecting the developing Global South to bear the burden of mitigation at the cost of their own development.

### Trade Wars and Protectionism

The resurrection of mercantilist thinking represents one of the most troubling aspects of our current predicament. For decades, economists and policymakers operated on the assumption that rational economic self-interest would inevitably lead nations towards free trade and open markets. That assumption has been comprehensively disproved. Trade wars have proliferated, supply chains have been weaponised, and economic interdependence-once celebrated as a force for peace-is now viewed with suspicion as a source of vulnerability.

The technology sector exemplifies this new reality. Semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI), and quantum computing-these are not merely commercial concerns but instruments of geopolitical competition. Export controls, investment restrictions, and technology transfer barriers have fragmented what was once a genuinely global industry. The United States has sought to constrain China's access to advanced semiconductor manufacturing equipment, whilst



Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on 05 December 2025  
(Photo Prakash Singh / Bloomberg)

China has retaliated with restrictions on rare earth exports. India, meanwhile, finds itself caught between competing imperatives: the desire to attract foreign investment and technology whilst maintaining strategic autonomy and nurturing indigenous capabilities.

This fragmentation extends beyond technology. Agricultural products, pharmaceuticals, and critical minerals-all have become subjects of strategic calculation rather than purely economic exchange. Countries are prioritising supply chain resilience over efficiency, national champions over global optimisation. The pandemic accelerated these trends, exposing the brittleness of just-in-time supply chains and inspiring a wave of vaccine nationalism that augured poorly for future global cooperation on public health challenges.

### The Global South's Assertion

Into this vacuum has stepped a newly assertive Global South. During India's G20 presidency in 2023, we succeeded in elevating the African Union to permanent membership-a symbolic but significant acknowledgement of Africa's growing importance and a rebuke to those who would perpetuate the continent's

marginalisation. The Voice of the Global South Summit, also convened under India's leadership, proposed a comprehensive **"Global Development Compact"** focusing on trade facilitation, capacity-building, and concessional finance-precisely the issues that multilateral institutions have failed to address adequately.

This is not an anti-Western movement, despite the tendency of some Western commentators to characterise it as such. **It is a movement for inclusion, for representation, for a voice in decisions that affect developing countries profoundly.** When developed nations exempt themselves from environmental

regulations whilst demanding that developing countries curtail their carbon emissions and sacrifice economic growth on the altar of climate mitigation, is it any wonder that the Global South demands a more equitable arrangement? When the architecture of global finance perpetuates debt traps and extracts wealth from poor countries whilst enriching creditors in wealthy ones, is it unreasonable to call for reform?

The BRICS grouping-Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, recently expanded to include several other nations-represents one manifestation of this assertiveness. Whatever one thinks of some of its members' domestic governance, BRICS reflects a desire to create alternative platforms for cooperation that are not dominated by Western powers. The New Development Bank, the Contingent Reserve Arrangement-these are not merely symbolic gestures but practical mechanisms for South-South cooperation.

### India's Unique Position and Responsibility

In this turbulent landscape, India occupies a unique and increasingly consequential position. Globally, we are neither a status quo power fully content with the existing order nor a revisionist power seeking to overturn it entirely. We are a civilisational state with a pluralistic democracy, a rapidly growing economy, strategic autonomy, and relationships spanning the geopolitical spectrum. If America is a melting pot, then India is a *thali*-a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls, each distinct yet contributing to a satisfying whole.

This diversity is both our strength and our challenge. We maintain robust partnerships with the United States through frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, collaborate with Russia on defence and energy, engage with China despite border tensions, and lead initiatives within the Global South. Some characterise this as strategic ambiguity; I

prefer to call it multi-alignment. We are not seeking to exist passively between competing powers, as non-alignment once allowed us to do, but to actively shape the space between them. We navigate an increasingly networked world with agility and clarity, forging coalitions that advance both national interests and universal principles.

This approach has served us well. India finds itself courted by major powers and smaller nations alike, precisely because we refuse to be subsumed into rigid blocs. Southeast Asian countries anxious to balance Beijing's growing influence look to New Delhi as a partner that can provide options without demanding exclusive allegiance. African nations value India's development assistance, which comes without the political conditionalities often attached to Western aid or the debt traps associated with some Chinese lending. Latin American countries appreciate India's advocacy for South-South cooperation and reform of global governance structures.

Yet we must acknowledge our vulnerabilities. Despite our growing clout, we remain -- to borrow a colleague's apt phrase -- "not the swing power that we desire to be, but a swung power buffeted by decisions made in Washington and Beijing." American tariff decisions profoundly affect our exporters. Chinese infrastructure investments in our neighbourhood shape regional dynamics. European climate policies influence our industrial development. The global financial system remains structured in ways that constrain our policy autonomy.

To transcend these constraints, India must build its own instruments of leverage. This requires continued economic growth, certainly, but also strategic investments in capabilities that enhance our autonomy: indigenous defence manufacturing, technological innovation, energy security,

and financial market depth. We must cultivate Europe as we have not done before, recognising the EU's emergence as a distinct pole in a multipolar world. We must diversify our partnerships, expand our trade agreements, and increase the diplomatic space we need to navigate global contradictions.

### The Path Forward: Pragmatism Tempered with Principle

What, then, should guide India's approach in this age of disorder? I would suggest five key principles.

**First, we must address the crisis of multilateralism.** The institutions of global governance that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War were designed for a different world. The United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade all reflected the power configurations and ideological assumptions of 1945. The UN has been under scrutiny, yet I do believe that we need to recommit ourselves to the

United Nations. As someone who served the UN for nearly three decades, from 1978 to 2007, I witnessed first-hand its evolution from a Cold War battleground to a post-Cold War laboratory of global cooperation. I saw the UN falter in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and rise to the occasion in East Timor and Namibia. I saw it struggle with bureaucracy and politics, yet persist in its mission to feed the hungry, shelter the displaced, and give voice to the voiceless. Today, when people decry its failures over Gaza and Ukraine, I acknowledge again that the UN is not perfect - nor was it ever meant to be - but it remains indispensable.

As someone who spent much of his adult life in its service, I remain convinced that the UN matters. It matters to the refugee seeking shelter, to the peacekeeper standing guard, to the diplomat negotiating a fragile truce. It matters to all of us who believe that cooperation is not weakness, and that justice is not a luxury. The United



Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping met on the sidelines of the two-day Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit 2025. (Credit Chinese Ambassador to India Xu Feibong's X handle)





Chinese President Xi Jinping met U.S. President Donald Trump in Busan, South Korea, 30 October, 2025. (Photo Xinhua / Huang Jingwen)

Nations remains an indispensable symbol - not of perfection, but of possibility. As Dag Hammarskjöld said, it was meant *“not to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell”*. In the aftermath of its 80th anniversary, its challenge is to become more representative, responsive, and resilient in a world that needs principled global cooperation more than ever. In this sense, the future of multilateralism rests not only on institutional reform but on rebuilding its legitimacy. It must resonate with the concerns of ordinary people, not only with diplomats. It must prove that global cooperation can generate real dividends-jobs, security, dignity-rather than merely uphold abstract principles. It must shift from technocracy to empathy. To turn away from this would be to turn away from the very idea of our shared humanity. Our own survival, and that of the only universal organisation we possess-the United Nations - relies not on sentimentality but on reinvention. And that reinvention begins with acknowledging that in an interconnected world, no nation can be fully sovereign unless all are.

This means that we must remain

committed to reforming rather than abandoning multilateral institutions. For all their flaws, these institutions provide irreplaceable platforms for dialogue, norm-setting, and collective action. The alternative to reformed multilateralism is not splendid isolation but anarchic competition-a Hobbesian world where might makes right and smaller nations are reduced to pawns in great power games. India has a compelling interest in a rules-based international order, even if we must work tirelessly to ensure those rules are equitable rather than instruments of hegemony.

**Second, we must build coalitions around specific issues rather than permanent alignments.** On climate change, we might work with developing

nations to demand climate justice and equitable financing, whilst collaborating with Western countries on green technology. On technology governance, we might partner with the EU on data privacy standards whilst engaging with the US on innovation ecosystems and AI development. On maritime security, we might cooperate with Japan, Australia, and the US in the Indo-Pacific whilst maintaining dialogue with China to prevent escalation. This issue-based approach allows us to maximise leverage whilst maintaining flexibility.

India must accelerate its move towards a genuine *“multi-aligned”* foreign policy, deepening strategic ties with other key global powers and regional groupings, in particular Europe, the UK, the Gulf States, Africa and ASEAN. The future of the Quad (with Japan, Australia, and the U.S.) remains uncertain, with Trump yet to confirm attendance at the next summit scheduled to be hosted by India. Its utility must be viewed constructively, but alongside the value of enhanced engagement with Russia, Central Asian states and even China. New Delhi should leverage its growing geopolitical weight to extract maximum benefit from competing powers.

**Third, we must invest heavily in South-South cooperation,** recognising that the Global South's collective voice grows more powerful when we speak in concert. During its G-20 presidency in 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India was now the voice of the Global South-unbowed, plural, and potent. Its democracy, he said, was not just a system but a *“bouquet of hope,”* nourished by the strength of its multilingual, multicultural fabric. India's development assistance, technical expertise, and diplomatic convening power position us naturally as a leader in this space. Our diplomacy must be assertive,

pragmatic, and unapologetically Indian, seeking to be “*non-West*” without being “*anti-West*”. This stance resonates across the Global South, where many rising and middle powers-concerned with peace and stability in their own regions - are choosing to safeguard their geopolitical and economic interests rather than be swept into the vortex of great-power rivalries. They seek agency, not alignment; voice, not vassalage.

But leadership requires more than speeches at summits; it demands concrete action-capacity building in healthcare and education, technology transfer in renewable energy and digital infrastructure, knowledge sharing on democratic governance and pluralistic societies.

**Fourth, we must never lose sight of our values.** India's sustained commitment to constitutional democracy, its celebration of diversity, its civilizational religious pluralism, its rejection of hegemonic ambitions-these are not merely internal characteristics but foundations of our international standing. As authoritarian alternatives to liberal democracy proliferate, India's example becomes increasingly valuable. We demonstrate daily that a diverse, populous developing nation can govern itself democratically, accommodate multiple faiths and languages, empower citizens through free expression and rule of law, and pursue development without sacrificing liberty. This soft power-the power of example, of culture, of ideas-may prove as consequential as any military capability.

**Fifth, we must cultivate both strategic autonomy and strategic restraint.** The current global landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for India's strategic autonomy. The unipolar moment of American dominance

has given way to a fragmented world order, where China's assertiveness, Russia's revisionism, and the West's internal divisions, accentuated by Washington's unpredictability, create a fluid and unpredictable environment. For India, this means recalibrating its relationships with major powers while safeguarding its core interests-territorial integrity, economic growth, technological advancement, and regional stability. India must be a sovereign pole in a rebalancing world-a nation that neither aligns blindly nor isolates itself. Strategic autonomy requires not just diplomatic skill, but economic strength, technological capability, and political coherence. We cannot be truly autonomous from a position of weakness.

In a world of cyber threats, AI warfare, and space competition, autonomy must extend beyond traditional domains. It must encompass data sovereignty, digital infrastructure, and supply chain security. India's recent efforts to build indigenous platforms, secure critical minerals, and assert its voice in global tech governance are steps in this direction.

**Strategic autonomy is not just a slogan-it is a strategy. It is the art of navigating a turbulent world without losing one's bearings.** For India, it is both a legacy and a necessity, rooted in its civilizational ethos and geopolitical imperatives. As the global order shifts, India must continue steadily to walk the tightrope-engaging with the U.S. without becoming a vassal, deterring China without provoking war, and partnering with Russia without inheriting its isolation. It must invest in capabilities, cultivate partnerships, and assert its interests with clarity and confidence.

The temptation to match rivals

symmetrically-to build aircraft carriers because China builds them, to establish bases abroad because others do-must be resisted. India's strength lies not in mimicking others but in playing to our distinctive advantages: our demographic dividend, our democratic credentials, our diaspora, our cultural appeal. Hard power has its place, certainly, but it must be balanced with soft power and deployed judiciously rather than reflexively.

In pursuing strategic autonomy with restraint, India does not reject the world-it reclaims its agency within it. Strategic autonomy is not about standing alone; it is about standing straight, and standing tall.

### An Imperative for Imagination

We stand at a juncture that demands not merely tactical dexterity but genuine strategic imagination.

The old order is dying, and the new one struggles to be born. In this interregnum, as the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci observed, all sorts of morbid symptoms appear-xenophobia, authoritarianism, zero-sum thinking, the resort to force rather than diplomacy. Yet the same uncertainty that produces these pathologies also creates opportunities for transformation.

India has a major role to play in shaping the regimes of the future, given our size, growing clout, and stake in practically every major multilateral organisation. Our unique identity as a non-hegemonic global power positions us to script an equitable ethic for a new international order-one that accommodates different voices, gives the Global South a meaningful seat at the table, provides China a place that is respectable without allowing



UN Climate Change conference COP 26 (Photo earth.org)

domination, and extends to countries like India and African nations their rightful place of honour.

This will require moving beyond the risk of greater bipolarity towards genuine multipolarity. It will demand reforms to global structures even in the absence of crises as catastrophic as those that birthed the United Nations. It will necessitate respect and humility in our approaches to others, liberal and free-thinking engagement that opens minds rather than closes them, and a recognition that we all live downstream from one another's choices.

The challenges we confront—climate change, pandemic disease, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, mass migration, technological disruption—respect no borders and yield to no single nation's efforts. They cry out for solutions that, like the problems themselves, cross frontiers. Whether one hails from Delhi or Denver, Toronto or Tokyo, it is simply unrealistic to think only in terms of one's own country. Global forces press in from every conceivable direction; people, goods, and ideas traverse vast distances with ever greater frequency, speed, and ease.

In this interdependent world, India's greatest contribution may be demonstrating that plurality need not mean paralysis, that democracy

need not mean dysfunction, that development need not demand authoritarianism. If we can harmonise our diverse interests like the different elements on a *thali*, if we can balance pragmatism with principle, if we can lead by example rather than by diktat—then we will have shown that another world is possible, one more just and equitable than the one we inherited.

The question is not whether the global order will be transformed—that transformation is already underway. The question is whether we possess sufficient wisdom, courage, and imagination to ensure that what emerges from the chrysalis of the old order is a butterfly

rather than a moth, a creature of beauty rather than destruction. **India's answer to that question will profoundly shape not merely our own future but that of the world we inhabit together.**

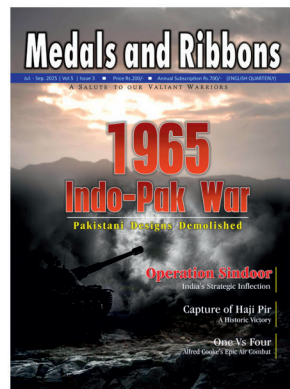
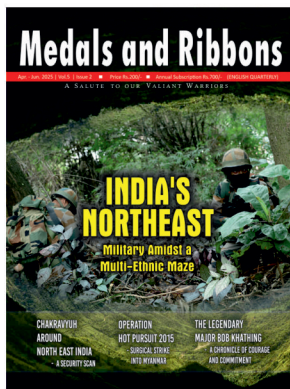
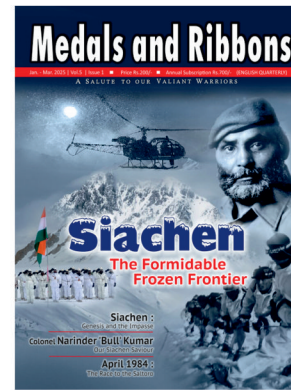
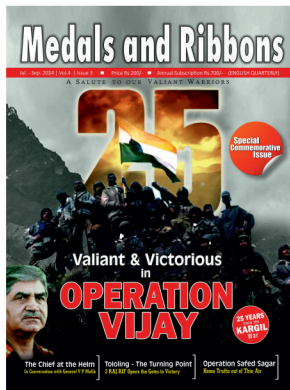


*Dr. Shashi Tharoor, a Member of Parliament since 2009, has won the Lok Sabha Elections four times from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. A member of the Indian National Congress, Tharoor is a former diplomat and was formerly an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. Tharoor graduated from St. Stephen's College, Delhi, in 1975 and was conferred a doctorate in international relations and affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University a few years later in 1978. At the age of 22, he was the youngest person at the time to receive such an honour from the Fletcher School. During the Manmohan Singh Government, Shashi Tharoor served as the Minister of State for External Affairs. An erudite scholar and intellectual, an acclaimed public speaker, Dr Tharoor is a Sahitya Akademi Award winner, who has authored many works of fiction and non-fiction since 1981. He is presently the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs.*



Dr Shashi Tharoor





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