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The Army in Indian Military Strategy: Rethink Doctrine or Risk Irrelevance

Arzan Tarapore

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Summary

Ground forces dominate Indian military strategy. Since its independence, India has fought five wars along its unsettled northern land borders, and its most vexing security threats today—as illustrated by the ongoing Chinese incursions in the northern region of Ladakh—still loom across those same borders. The Indian Army commands a clear and growing majority of military budget allocations and an even larger share of military personnel. But how does India use its ground forces, and how well do they serve Indian security interests?

This paper argues that the Indian Army—and by extension, Indian defense policy more generally— is dominated by an orthodox offensive doctrine. This is an approach to the use of force that centers on large army formations, operating relatively autonomously from political direction, seeking to impose a punitive cost on the enemy. The punitive cost often takes the form of capturing enemy territory as a bargaining chip, even though India usually pursues strategically defensive war aims to maintain the territorial status quo.

This paper advances four analytic propositions before concluding with recommendations for the Indian Army. First, the orthodox offensive doctrine has been at the center of the Indian military's wartime experience, organization, and doctrine. It defined India's strategy during the wars against Pakistan in 1965, 1971, and 1999, and has shaped Indian crisis behavior since. Doctrinal innovations along the way, such as the Cold Start doctrine, have sought to optimize rather than rethink the orthodox offensive doctrine.

Second, India's strategic environment has fundamentally changed since it fought its last war in 1999. Nuclear deterrence between India and its rivals, Pakistan and China, has reduced the likelihood of major war but simultaneously increased the salience of military coercion below the threshold of war. The extraordinary modernization of China's military threatens India not only on their land border, but also in new locales like the Indian Ocean and new domains like space and cyberspace. Advanced military technologies are changing the character of contemporary conflict and levying new demands on the military's organization, training, and doctrine.

Third, the Indian military has failed to keep pace with these strategic changes. Even though it carries powerful incentives for reform, its mechanisms to drive and implement change are problematic. India lacks a periodic strategic review process, the military services are resistant to change, and the civilian leadership has rarely exercised the will to implement reforms. The new Chief of Defence Staff position has already begun to reshape civil-military relations and should propel other organizational reforms—but there is no evidence yet of the Indian Army rethinking its orthodox offensive doctrine.

Fourth, the stubborn dominance of this doctrine renders the Indian military a less useful tool of national policy. The orthodox offensive doctrine is problematic because, given its powerful adversaries, the Indian Army probably cannot seize significant tracts of land or inflict a decisive defeat on enemy forces. This means India's cost-imposition strategies are unlikely to deter its rivals from continued subconventional provocations. At the same time, India's punitive strategies have had the unintended effect of motivating its rivals to pursue more destabilizing and provocative strategies of their own, including Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons and China's fait accompli land grabs. And the doctrine exacts an opportunity cost, reducing India's force projection and deterrence capabilities in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian military will continue to lack the resources required for long-overdue modernization as long as the army continues to emphasize its orthodox offensive doctrine.

The dominance of the orthodox offensive doctrine has distorted Indian military strategy, skewing it to fight large conventional wars and leaving it ill-equipped to manage more likely scenarios short of war. In several crises in recent decades, New Delhi has been left with an invidious all-or-nothing choice in the use of military force—either start a major conventional war or abstain from action.

To rebalance Indian military strategy, with more usable military options, this paper offers three recommendations for the Indian Army, which are designed to require relatively modest additional resources and generate minimal resistance among other services or the civilian bureaucracy.

- **Consider new theories of victory.** To deter and defeat coercion, the Indian Army should consider rebalancing its doctrine with greater use of denial strategies. It should more frequently seek to make coercion and territorial revisionism prohibitively costly or unfeasible for the enemy rather than relying on ex post facto punishment.
- **Consider how to be the supporting element of a joint force.** Indian forces will increasingly be compelled to deter and fight in multiple domains and different theaters, and the army should therefore consider how to play a productive role in new missions where it supports a main effort elsewhere.
- **Consider new niche capabilities.** The army can make sizable and qualitatively different contributions to joint combat by developing more robust intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities and by increasing its capacity for long-range precision strike.

Introduction

Modern India's military strategy has been dominated by ground forces managing threats on its northern continental periphery. Air power has traditionally been used only as a supporting adjunct to land power, rather than an independent strategic tool; and India has not projected significant maritime force despite a notable history of seafaring and influence across the Indian Ocean region. Historically, there were sound reasons for this emphasis on ground forces. Wedged between two powerful and hostile neighbors, Pakistan and China, independent India fought five land wars along its northern land borders. Its most formative modern episodes were entirely or almost entirely ground-force actions. This includes its most searing defeat against China in 1962 and its most celebrated victory, in East Pakistan in 1971. India's most immediate security threats today, from cross-border terrorism in the northern territories of Jammu and Kashmir to periodic incursions across its disputed boundary with China, are managed by the army and ground-force paramilitaries. To handle all this, the army attracts an ever-growing share of the military budget and resources. Despite its potential as a hybrid continental-maritime power, India's security policy is dominated by ground forces.

More specifically, as this paper shows, India's military strategy has been dominated by an *orthodox offensive doctrine*—a method of using force that favors large formations tasked with punitive incursions into enemy territory. This doctrine is orthodox in its preference for large combined-arms army formations, usually operating with minimal coordination with other services and relatively autonomously from its political masters. It is offensive in its military aims of imposing a punitive cost on the enemy—usually in the form of capturing territory for the purposes of gaining leverage in postwar negotiations—even if it is usually deployed in the service of a strategically defensive policy of maintaining the territorial status quo. And it is a doctrine in that it represents an enduring set of principles governing the Indian Army's use of force, regardless of the scarcity of public doctrinal publications.

This paper argues that the stubborn dominance of the orthodox offensive doctrine, even in the face of drastic changes in India's strategic environment, renders the military a less useful tool of national policy. In the two decades since India fought its last war in and around the district of Kargil in 1999, three major strategic trends have fundamentally changed India's security environment: nuclear deterrence has made major conventional war unlikely; China's military power and assertiveness now pose an unprecedented threat; and radical new technologies have redefined the military state of the art. India's security policy has not kept pace. Given the balance of military power on India's northern borders, India cannot decisively defeat either Pakistan or China on the battlefield. Without the ability to impose such unacceptable costs, India's doctrine will not deter its rivals, which both have significant resolve to bear the costs of conflict. The continued pursuit of large, offensive military options also raises the risk that its enemies will rely on escalatory—even

nuclear—responses. And because the doctrine demands a force structure of large ground-holding formations, it pulls scarce resources away from modernization and regional force projection—a problem made especially acute as the Indian government makes tough economic choices amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five parts. First, it surveys the history of India's military strategy, showing its reliance on ground forces and the orthodox offensive doctrine. Second, it outlines the three major strategic changes that have upended India's security environment in the twenty-first century. Third, it analyzes the reasons why India's strategy and doctrine have failed to adapt. Fourth, the paper argues that India's military is less useful in this new environment. Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations for the Indian Army.

India's Use of the Orthodox Offensive Doctrine

Modern India's security has been challenged from its beginning—and from the beginning, ground forces have been central to India's military response. In particular, the Indian Army's use of force in conventional conflicts has been governed by the orthodox offensive doctrine. The doctrine's theory of victory relies on the logic of deterrence by punishment—that India's threat of a prohibitively costly retaliation will convince its enemy to refrain from aggression. This orthodox offensive doctrine was practiced through several successive conflicts, institutionalized through organizational reforms and professional military education, and codified in official publications, including the latest Land Warfare Doctrine, released in 2018.[1] Since the army is by far the largest and best-resourced service, at the forefront of every war and current-day plans, this doctrine has taken on even larger proportions as the de facto national military strategy of India.

The orthodox offensive doctrine took center stage by the mid-1960s, propelled by two formative experiences that taught the Indian military the limits of the British Raj's frontier defense doctrine.[2] The first Kashmir war, in 1947–48, was a light-infantry conflict to gain control of the disputed territory.[3] India quickly seized control of Srinagar and the Kashmir Valley, with most fighting thereafter occurring in the surrounding mountainous terrain. This reduced the scope for using combined arms, let alone other services. Air power did, however, play a vital—if not decisive—role in the war, when India used an air assault on Srinagar airport to launch its initial deployment into Kashmir. This allowed Indian forces to seize the initiative, establish and reinforce their military presence in the vital valley before Pakistan could, and resupply its lead forces. Without that initial use of air power, India would not have been able to make its timely intervention or sustain its operations in Kashmir. The bulk of the subsequent inconclusive fighting was done by India's newly inherited ground forces. They secured ground lines of communication through Jammu to sustain the fight

in the following months and pressed out of the valley to fight for control in the mountains until a ceasefire suspended hostilities.

Whereas India's first conflict ended in stalemate, its second, against China in 1962, ended in a bruising defeat that casts a pall over Indian military thinking to this day.[4] Fighting to repel Chinese incursions on a broad front, the Indian Army once again was forced to engage in grueling infantry combat in high mountains. Indian doctrine, hardly deviating from the time of the Raj, dictated that its forces would be arrayed to defend the country in depth, stretching enemy lines before mounting a counteroffensive. The outer perimeter comprised small "penny packets" that were not mutually reinforcing and lacked the ability to plug losses or exploit gains, so China could make decisive shallow incursions with ineffectual Indian resistance.[5] For Indian defenders, the parlous state of Indian roads up the steep escarpments made resupply tortuously slow and inefficient and greatly reduced the availability of artillery support. India used its air force for resupply but refrained from using air power to conduct offensive operations against Chinese forces, for fear of an unwanted escalation. Combat remained firmly fixed on the use of ground forces. The war was short, but India sustained a devastating loss, prompting major postwar changes in the Indian Army. In quick order, India committed fully to the orthodox offensive doctrine, almost doubling the size of its army in less than a decade and giving it virtually complete autonomy from political oversight over operational matters.[6]

In 1965, war returned to Kashmir.[7] For the first time, the Indian Army had the resource and terrain advantages to more faithfully execute its orthodox offensive doctrine. Pakistan's initial bid to seize control of the divided territory used irregular forces, and India's initial response was accordingly a security force and light-infantry effort. After Pakistan escalated the conflict with a combined-arms conventional attack in Jammu, India responded with a massive counterattack in Punjab. In terrain navigable by tanks, India deployed large, corps-sized formations featuring armor and artillery. According to Indian plans, this attack should have yielded massive penetrating firepower and maneuver to seize Pakistani territory and destroy its offensive forces. Despite this, most major maneuvers stalled within a week, and the two sides fell into a grinding tactical stalemate. India's conventional offensive operations were stuck. India did use its air force in strike and close air support roles, but notwithstanding some high-profile engagements early in the war, air power's impact was tactically marginal at best and strategically irrelevant. Despite the stalemate, this orthodox offensive doctrine would continue to dominate the Indian Army's plans from 1965 to the present.

The pinnacle of India's warfighting experience came in 1971, when India's decisive victory split its archrival, Pakistan, in two, creating the new independent state of Bangladesh.[8] India launched its massive invasion of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after months of deliberate planning, mobilization, and shaping operations. The army's operations displayed a virtuosity of combined-arms

maneuver, including multiple deep penetrating attacks using highly mobile infantry, armor and artillery support, and a storied airborne drop. Aside from that airborne operation, a small heliborne river crossing, and some limited close air support, the Indian race to Dacca (now Dhaka) was again a ground force effort. The 1971 war also featured a naval dimension—although it amounted to a gallant sideshow with no impact on the outcome of the conflict. At no time before or since 1971 has India wielded its conventional military power so effectively: it used ground forces not only to achieve an operational decision but also to fundamentally reorder its strategic position against its primary competitor, Pakistan.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Indian Army became heavily engaged in multiple irregular conflicts. This included an expeditionary counterinsurgency in Sri Lanka in which—despite the irregular setting—the army persisted with tactics that were dominated by mass and firepower rather than more sophisticated unconventional warfare operations.[9] The Indian army and paramilitaries also fought domestically in a decades-long Naxalite insurgency, in tribal insurgencies in the northeast, against the Khalistani Sikh separatist movement, and in a high-intensity Kashmir insurgency. In all these theaters, India's defining strategic actions were large, manpower-intensive, ground force operations.

While the Indian Army labored with these irregular conflicts, it was also experimenting with a major push toward mechanization. Led by reform-minded former chiefs of army staff Krishna Rao and K. Sundarji, the Indian Army raised new mechanized infantry units equipped with armored personnel carriers and organized into fast-moving Reorganized Army Plains Infantry Divisions (RAPIDs). India's three Strike Corps were assigned the wartime task of penetrating deep into Pakistan—that is, not only to capture borderlands but also to threaten key population centers and lines of communication. Sundarji's reforms were inspired by the U.S. military's maneuverist doctrine of AirLand Battle, which sought to take rapid offensive action deep into the enemy's rear areas, to disrupt and paralyze the enemy force.[10] For the Indian Army, these reforms were intended to increase the lethality and effectiveness of large conventional forces, enabling them to strike deep into enemy territory.[11] In other words, by focusing on theater-level plans independent of the political context, and deep offensive action, they were designed to optimize—not rethink—the orthodox offensive doctrine. Sundarji sought to test the new capabilities in a massive multicorps combined-arms exercise on India's western land border. The exercise, known as Brasstacks, triggered a months-long crisis that raised the specter of a major war.[12] As the Brasstacks war scare showed, however, the army's traditional autonomy from its political leaders—reinforced by a newer emphasis on the "operational level of war"—could also have strategic effects unintended and undesired by the political leadership.[13]

The last conventional war over Kashmir, in Kargil in 1999, was another failed bid by Pakistan to create a fait accompli by seizing land across the Line of Control.[14] In this war, fought just one year after India and Pakistan had become declared nuclear powers, both sides sought to under-

take limited ground action while controlling escalation. India famously deployed fighter aircraft in a close air support role, with the stipulation that they not cross the Line of Control. But their role was a marginal enabling function. Air support was hampered by an inability to target precision weapons—until the problem was partially rectified during the war—and a failure of army and air force staff to share campaign and targeting plans.[15] The bulk of the fighting, occurring in the high mountains, was done by infantry that had reinforced Indian positions on the front. The Indian Army also raised readiness levels and forward deployed some formations elsewhere along the Line of Control and the international border, in preparation for escalation by either India or Pakistan. Indian troops fought doggedly to reclaim occupied territory, peak by peak, although ultimately the war was decided by U.S. diplomatic intervention compelling Pakistan to withdraw its forces.

While nuclear deterrence helped to prevent conventional wars after Kargil, India has nevertheless endured several security crises, especially in response to Pakistan-based cross-border terrorism. Each of these crises, whether they resulted in Indian military action or not, served to underscore the limited utility of major ground force mobilizations and India's preference for an orthodox offensive doctrine. In 2001–2002, in retaliation for terrorist attacks in New Delhi and Srinagar, India mobilized all three of its Strike Corps in preparation for punitive attacks on Pakistan—a step it had been careful not to take during the Kargil war.[16] The mobilization, known as Operation Parakram, exposed the parlous state of Indian Army readiness and, specifically, its inability to provide Indian policymakers with available options for using military force in a timely manner. The Indian Army responded with an announced reform known as Cold Start, designed to enable rapid mobilization of forces and limited offensive options that India could employ before anticipated international diplomatic intervention.[17] These reforms, however, were slow to materialize. Following more terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2005 and 2008, India still had no usable military options for retaliation—the orthodox offensive doctrine left it only the highly escalatory option of a limited conventional war. Faced with that all-or-nothing choice, India chose to absorb the attacks while proclaiming high-minded fidelity to the principle of "strategic restraint."[18]

India finally relinquished this forbearing position in 2016, when it announced a special operations raid across the Line of Control as a reprisal for a terrorist attack in the town of Uri in Jammu and Kashmir. And in 2019, in response to a Pakistan-based attack in the city of Pulwama also in Jammu and Kashmir, India launched an airstrike against a terrorist camp at Balakot, in undisputed Pakistani territory. The Indian retaliations were hailed domestically as signifiers of a newly powerful and confident India. Both of these strikes were departures from the orthodox offensive doctrine—they used small force packages, eschewing the major ground formations that would have triggered a war—but both also revealed the limitations of the logic of punitive retaliation on which the doctrine is based. They were more important as signals of Indian political resolve and dangerous appetite for

risk rather than as an effective cost-imposition strategy.[19] They achieved negligible operational effects on the targeted terrorist networks—indeed, the airstrike at Balakot may have missed its target—or on Pakistani sponsorship of those groups.

A more effective Indian response occurred between these retaliatory strikes, on the other front. In 2017, Indian troops physically impeded the construction of a Chinese road at Doklam, in disputed territory claimed by China and Bhutan. In contrast to Indian strikes against Pakistan, the Indian action at Doklam was not part of a punitive strategy—India did not retaliate against China to convince it to reverse its provocation or desist from future actions. Rather, India used a denial strategy, impeding the Chinese action before it could be completed, seeking to convince China that its attempted land-grabs would not succeed.[20] Despite a notable Chinese buildup in nearby disputed territory after the crisis, the Doklam standoff nevertheless set a new standard for Indian countercoercive resolve and effectiveness, showing that India's ground forces could support policy when deployed as part of an appropriate strategy.

A More Challenging Strategic Environment

Since India fought its last conventional war in 1999, its strategic environment has changed considerably. As India's inchoate responses to crises since then reveal, its military doctrine and force structure still have not adapted. The scholarship on military innovation presents a broad consensus that military strategies are most likely to change in response to changes in the state's external environment. Specifically, states revise their military doctrines in response to an acute security crisis, especially one involving a rival with an established history of hostile intent; an adversary's change in strategy or military doctrine; a demand for new missions or new geographic operating areas; the threats and opportunities presented by new military technologies; or insights they gain from observing other conflicts.[21] In India's case, some of these external incentives for change apply more than others, but three major strategic changes of the twenty-first century—the nuclear revolution, China's military modernization, and new military technologies—certainly provide sufficient external motivation for change.

The first major strategic change was the open declaration by India and Pakistan that they had nuclear weapons, which introduced a new, confounding element into India's security policy. The introduction of an increasingly robust nuclear deterrence relationship with both of India's enduring rivals has decreased the probability of a major conventional war.[22] The Kargil war occurred soon after each belligerent had tested its nuclear weapons, before they had adjusted military strategies to account for the riskier dyadic relationship, and even then reflected the extreme sensitivities of avoiding escalation lest the conflict spin out of control.

Since then, Indian decisionmakers have been acutely sensitive to avoiding actions that could open the door to nuclear escalation. Pakistan has continued—and even intensified—its campaign of unconventional attacks using sponsored terrorist networks, raising the prospect of instability at the subconventional level, even while the adversaries worked to maintain stability at the strategic level.[23] To keep conflict confined to low levels, New Delhi averred from military responses after a range of terrorist provocations in the first decade of the twenty-first century, clearly mindful of Pakistan's vaguely stated red lines for nuclear initiation. Pakistan has signaled, through missile capability development and crisis behavior, that it would rely on nuclear weapons to defeat an Indian conventional assault. It brandished the threat even after the Balakot airstrike, before choosing to de-escalate. A major conflict, fought with India's orthodox offensive doctrine, would certainly raise the risk of uncontrolled escalation. This nuclear revolution, by making major conventional war less attractive, imposes on New Delhi a need to develop military tools for coercion below the level of its orthodox offensive doctrine.

Conversely, since nuclear deterrence makes major military losses unlikely, it also insulates India from the type of confidence-shaking crisis that might otherwise force a rethinking of its conventional military doctrine. India's stark defeat in 1962 prompted not only a massive enlargement of the army but also a restructuring of civil-military relations. Conversely, the fact that India has not been decisively defeated since then has denied it the incentive to launch a major revision of its strategy or doctrine. A series of stalemates and standoffs and the persistent threat of terrorist attacks have frustrated India's strategic goals and embarrassed its military. Some, like the surprise surrounding the Kargil war, have prompted internal reviews. But none have represented such a major strategic shock that India's military has been forced to question the fundamentals of its strategic approach.

The second significant strategic change has been the extraordinarily rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which poses a new, more comprehensive threat from China. Beyond the long-standing threat on their land border, the Chinese military also threatens Indian interests in other geographic areas, such as the Indian Ocean, and in other domains, such as space and cyberspace.[24] Most vividly, the PLA has built an impressive array of new materiel for all three military services—its navy, for example, launched more new shipping tonnage in 2014–2018 than the entire Indian Navy.[25] This force expansion has been enabled by its indigenous military industry, suggesting that China will retain the ability to continue meeting its strategic needs with domestic suppliers rather than relying on foreign-produced weapons as it once did. Moreover, much of this new materiel increasingly uses state-of-the-art technology, reflecting years of intellectual property theft, especially from the United States, which gives Chinese industry ready if uneven access to advanced technology. The PLA has also embarked on wholesale organizational and doctrinal reforms. These reforms have placed a premium on the ability of the services to fight jointly, along with cyber and space support, pushing tactical decisionmaking to lower echelons to enable more rapid and agile battlefield performance.

China's military is not only growing in capability but also posing new threats that Indian decision-makers have not previously had to confront. China has begun to build strategic influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean via a large program of security assistance, including the sale of military equipment and construction of infrastructure such as ports. It has rapidly increased its own direct military presence in the region through an ostensible Gulf of Aden antipiracy task force. The PLA now regularly sails surface combatants, submarines, and oceanographic survey ships through the Indian Ocean. Finally, China has demonstrated a willingness to use force for coercive purposes, often using "gray zone" tactics—that is, uses of force that seek to establish a fait accompli or pressure the adversary without escalation to open military conflict.[26] This has occurred most commonly in its adjacent waters and on the land border with India. But as such tactics have proven successful, China could plausibly use them against other smaller states in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region—in the same way that it has used economic tools of statecraft to coerce those states and build its political influence.

India has registered these threats and begun to respond—but only fitfully. In response to China's practice of building transport infrastructure and pre-positioning materiel near the border, India has accelerated its program of building long-neglected transport infrastructure—especially roads and airfields—on its side of the border. Indeed, the summer 2020 border crisis—in which PLA forces occupied pockets of land in Ladakh—was triggered at least in part by this Indian infrastructure building.[27] The Indian Navy has been self-consciously active in embracing new missions across the Indo-Pacific, and New Delhi has been keenly aware of the strategic signal that activity sends. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar bluntly declared, "The humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations undertaken in Yemen, Nepal, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Fiji and Mozambique are statements of capability as much as of responsibility."[28] But Indian ground forces have been slower to adopt a regionwide vision, instead remaining closely tied to the northern borders. This comprehensive new threat from China presents New Delhi with a broad suite of new challenges, in wartime and in peacetime strategic competition, that its orthodox offensive doctrine can no longer manage.

The third major strategic change is the step change in the complexity and effectiveness of military technology. To keep pace, India would need to make significant changes in its military acquisitions, organization, and doctrine. The United States and China, among other leading militaries, have assimilated a number of new technologies and practices that have greatly increased their lethality, readiness, and resilience. These technologies include those based on information technology—especially command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR), with which combat elements are networked together to gain superior battlespace awareness and deny it to the enemy. Major militaries have built new warfighting concepts and doctrines around these technologies—the United States pioneered them as the foundation of its Cold War-era "offset" strategy to defend against Soviet invasion of Europe, and China has embraced them

enthusiastically with its "informatized" warfare concepts to deter or fight the United States in East Asia. Related technologies improve a military's capability for long-range precision strike, using various types of highly accurate missiles and artillery to strike deep into enemy territory at relatively little cost. These capabilities, from sensors to shooters and their interconnecting networks, are all multiplied by the increasing use of automation and unmanned systems, which will soon be supplemented with more sophisticated artificial intelligence.[29]

These systems, of course, cannot simply be bolted onto existing military formations—to be fully effective, they work in concert with changes in doctrine and organization. Thus, China has used such systems to develop its Anti-Access/Area-Denial doctrine to keep intervening U.S. forces at arm's length while it imposes its will on a smaller neighbor. The PLA's reorganization to establish joint theater commands should allow its various force elements, across different services, to execute such strategies— although China's capabilities remain untested. Combating such tactics remains a thorny challenge even for the world's most capable militaries. The United States' response, designed for use both in peacetime competition as well as wartime, is the new concept of Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), which sees all domains—land, air, sea, space, and cyberspace—as interdependent. In MDO, the military should no longer presume the land domain to be the decisive arena of conflict, as it was in prior concepts like AirLand Battle; rather, forces in each domain should support and enable forces in another domain, seeking moments of advantage that they can quickly exploit to defeat the enemy's systems.[30] Several other militaries, from Israel to Japan, have adopted and in some cases field-tested similar concepts and doctrines. Even small and very resource-constrained forces, such as the Australian Defense Force, are feverishly working on concepts to make their combat units more networked and digital. The spread of these technologies and concepts is not restricted to the world's leading powers.

These new capabilities impose an urgent need on New Delhi to keep pace, with either similar changes or asymmetric alternatives. But India's defense-industrial system, led by the Defense Research and Development Organization, has been slow to adapt, let alone innovate. Some exceptions are noteworthy—for example, its indigenous missile program is robust, having developed a suite of ballistic missiles, as well as the BrahMos cruise missile jointly with Russia—and the country has a sufficient national technological base to be globally competitive in the space and cyber domains. Aside from such niche capabilities, however, India's indigenous weapons development and production—exemplified by the Arjun tank, the Tejas fighter, and even rifles and helmets—has generally been characterized by enormous cost overruns, delays, and obsolete technology.[31] Combat forces have had to make do with what they have. Since the orthodox offensive doctrine generates its combat power from the mass of large conventional formations, the Indian military continues to deprioritize technological or conceptual innovation.

A Failure to Adapt

Despite the abundance of incentives, India's military strategy has not adapted quickly to the evolving strategic environment. This section argues that while the motivations for change are apparent, the mechanisms for change are problematic.[32] In particular, India lacks a periodic strategic review process, the military services are resistant to change, and the civilian leadership has rarely exercised the will to implement reforms.

In the first instance, adapting to external changes requires accurate strategic assessments and a rational deliberation of policy options. Such tasks are best performed in a periodic strategic planning process. The U.S. government, for example, is mandated to produce a written National Security Strategy, from which several other nested planning documents flow, such as the National Defense Strategy. All major powers—including China, France, Japan, Russia, and the United Kingdom—produce defense policy white papers. These documents systematically assess the current and projected strategic environment and, with varying degrees of rigor, outline the country's long-term defense policy approach. They serve not only to signal the state's military strategy and posture for friends and potential adversaries but, ideally, also to guide a range of strategic plans from materiel acquisition to military cooperation programs.

India is alone among major powers in not regularly producing such a deliberate planning document. This inhibits its capacity for long-range warning of strategic threats and for a rational distribution of resources. A National Security Strategy document has reportedly been completed, and select portions are awaiting declassification and public release.[33] However, Indian military strategy thus far has lacked this national-level strategic assessment and policy analysis. Therefore, decisions on defense budgets and their apportionment between services and missions are an annual exercise in incremental change—tinkering with the previous year's allocation rather than periodically reviewing requirements from first principles—and are therefore unlikely ever to change course appreciably. Without such a standing process, threats are less likely to be identified early. Thus, the continued growth of Chinese military capabilities is not systematically registered and is only likely to claim political salience in the event of a high-profile militarized conflict. Similarly, matters of acquisition and doctrine have traditionally been left to the individual services, to suit service preferences, rather than being a unified assessment of national strategic requirements—although that may change if the newly established Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) position is able to take control.

The services' organizational cultures are another powerful impediment to doctrinal change. A large body of scholarship has established that militaries often exhibit an organizational preference for offensive doctrines.[34] This is then manifested in acquisitions programs that favor prestigious and

expensive weapon systems, such as capital ships and fighter aircraft, and promotion pathways that favor the tribal subcultures of combat-arms officers—that is, in the army, officers from infantry, artillery, and armor. Even beyond militaries' frequent bias favoring the offensive, organizational cultures exert a powerful conforming influence on military activity. They are extremely effective in socializing their members and reproducing their group preferences, in effect entrenching consistent habits—even, at times, skewing formal doctrine and operational guidance in line with those organizational preferences.[35] Doctrinal change takes time to consolidate, so a short tenure for service chiefs, and the inability to ensure succession by like-minded reformers, would exacerbate the impediments to change.[36] Ultimately, militaries are large bureaucracies, and any large bureaucracy naturally and purposefully avoids disruptive innovation.[37]

India's military services are no exception. Left to its own devices, the Indian Army has persisted with deep-rooted practices favoring the orthodox offensive doctrine. Meanwhile, the generally nonexpert civilian bureaucracy is unable to drive change or arbitrate between intramilitary disputes.[38] Even occasional episodes of reassessment have reinforced the army's existing patterns in strategy and doctrine rather than challenging them. Thus, for example, the introduction of the RAPIDs and the perennial discussions of Cold Start both continued to emphasize offensive doctrines using large formations; they were attempts to optimize the tactical effectiveness and the readiness of Indian Army forces rather than to reimagine their strategic utility. In 2018, then chief of army staff General Bipin Rawat advanced some comparatively bold reform plans. Once implemented, these reforms should realize budgetary efficiencies by cutting up to 100,000 personnel from the army, reorganizing Army Headquarters staff, and reducing unit and formation headquarters, but their most radical plan is to shift the army to a brigade-based Integrated Battle Group (IBG) organizational structure. By reassigning some enablers and logistics from division down to brigade level, this reorganization is designed to deploy formations quickly to make shallow incursions into enemy territory—finally implementing the organizational and readiness requirements of Cold Start.[39] Thus, despite these structural changes, the Indian Army has not been dissuaded from its organizational preference for large offensive operations designed to capture enemy territory.

Given that the military is unlikely to overhaul its strategic approach independently, the final major impediment to doctrinal change has been the traditional absence of authoritative civilian direction to change. Scholars have long recognized the importance of strong-willed civilian intervention to force changes in military strategy.[40] Since militaries have such powerful organizational cultures, reform-minded military leaders are rare, and those who favor reform are then likely to encounter withering opposition from within the ranks. Thus, change is more likely to come from civilian leaders, outside and above the military, who reach down and force the institution to align with national strategy or answer a particularly acute threat.[41] These civilians may be supported by a like-minded "maverick" military reformer, because civilians often lack the military expertise to direct and consolidate

change.[42] Whether innovation is led by civilian or military leaders, some degree of active civilian engagement is necessary to identify and implement major doctrinal changes.

Indeed, in India, most recent initiatives for major doctrinal changes have originated with the civilian leadership—although thus far many of these initiatives have ultimately been thwarted. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) led by the doyen of Indian strategic analysis, K. Subrahmanyam, issued a wide range of recommendations to address the weaknesses revealed by the Kargil war.[43] The KRC's recommendations were considered by the subsequent review of the Group of Ministers, including a subordinate task force on defense management led by the former politician and senior ministerial advisor, Arun Singh, which issued its report in 2001.[44] The government adopted some of its recommendations piecemeal. India inaugurated its Integrated Defense Staff in 2001, for example, to consolidate certain joint warfighting and support functions, and it established the Andaman and Nicobar Command as India's first joint command.[45]

Further civilian-led attempts at doctrinal change also met with mixed results. Another expert task force, led by former distinguished civil servant, Naresh Chandra, issued its report in 2012, which also ran the gamut of doctrinal and structural issues.[46] The report met with customary resistance from the government, the services, and the civilian bureaucracy.[47] Another expert committee, led by retired general D. B. Shekatkar, offered recommendations in December 2016 to create a CDS and to consolidate the current seventeen single-service operational commands into just three joint theater commands. The recommendations also called for downsizing some of the army's support elements—everything from consolidating the army's signal units to closing its dairy farms.[48]

The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, empowered by two decisive electoral mandates, has provided the political muscle to enact some of these long-overdue reforms. Early on, the government evinced a clear understanding of the importance of military modernization. At the Combined Commanders' Conference aboard the INS *Vikramaditya* in 2015, Modi outlined some important principles: the need to shrink the size of the force—especially support elements—and make greater use of technology, the particular value of cyber and space capabilities as enablers, and the imperative of promoting jointness.[49] But implementation of the vision was initially slow. In 2018, the government announced a slate of reforms to expand the national security advisor's budget and control of interagency coordination.[50] In 2019, the military inaugurated three new joint structures—the Defense Cyber Agency, the Defense Space Agency, and the Special Operations Division—as the Chandra committee originally recommended.[51]

The transformative change, however, came with the establishment of the CDS position, announced with characteristic surprise in August 2019 and inaugurated in January 2020. The position, long the chimera of multiple review committees, does not hold any operational command

responsibility, but the incumbent serves as the government's principal military advisor and controls existing tri-service organizations. As the head of the Department of Military Affairs within the Ministry of Defense, the CDS also oversees senior promotions—critical in shaping service cultures—as well as the size and organization of the army, expeditionary operations, and security cooperation with regional partners.[52] Perhaps even more importantly, the first CDS, Rawat, has been tasked with planning and leading organizational reforms to promote jointness in the force. The headline objective is the establishment of joint operational commands, beginning with a joint air defense command, maritime command, and then geographically defined theater commands. Equally importantly, the CDS has also been tasked with consolidating the services' separate arrangements for logistics, communications, training, and other enablers—the sinews that undergird true operational jointness.

Aside from reforming military organizations, Rawat has also shown how the CDS may alter civil-military relations in India. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, he announced sweeping changes to the military's procurement policies—specifically, that it would redouble efforts to acquire equipment from domestic rather than foreign sources. Controversially, he suggested that this push for indigenization would require the military to ruthlessly prioritize its core missions and demand less advanced equipment.[53] In so doing, Rawat was imposing the Modi government's wider economic reform program of *atmanirbhar* (self-reliance) on the military services.[54] The office of CDS was serving—exactly as it should—as a mechanism to transmit political will to the military rather than allowing the services to pursue their own internally generated modernization plans. Whether the CDS will succeed remains uncertain. In this, as in any other policy issue, Rawat will likely require a combination of codified authorities and informal powers of persuasion to bend the autonomous services to his—and the government's—will. The renewed push for Make in India defense procurement will stand as a test case not only of the government's pandemic-management economic reforms but also of the CDS's role in civil-military relations.

A Less Useful Force

Given the absence of major reforms, the Indian military will become decreasingly useful as an instrument of national power. The army remains, by far, the largest and best-resourced of the Indian military services, accounting for 57 percent of the defense budget (compared to 23 percent for the air force and 14 percent for the navy) and for 85 percent of military personnel (compared to 9 percent for the air force and 4 percent for the navy).[55] Within the army, the bias favoring conventional offensive operations is perpetuated through an officer promotion system that uses quotas to greatly favor officers from the combat arms, especially infantry and artillery.[56] The army's general staff reflects this combat-arms privilege and perpetuates it through its control of doctrine and organization of the force.

However, it lacks the key enablers to deter or defeat a modern, information-era adversary—especially the C4ISR capabilities that knit together sensors and shooters and the long-range precision weapons that can target the enemy's vital rear areas and lines of communication. It lacks the organization for joint deterrence and warfighting, in which the military services are integrated with each other from the highest levels of command down to tactical units, both to defend the Indian homeland and to project expeditionary power into the region. Perhaps most fundamentally, it lacks a theory of victory that would use Indian forces to coerce, deter coercion, and, if necessary, fight, all in ways that are responsive to national political direction.

The Indian military strategy's principal theory of victory, since at least 1965, has focused on punishment. This theory suggests that India could defeat aggression and deter future attacks by imposing sufficient costs on the enemy—especially by capturing some enemy territory as a bargaining chip for postwar negotiations.[57] The Indian Army did this in the 1965 and 1971 wars, and prepared to do this in the 1999 war before diplomatic intervention ended the conflict. It expected to do this in Operation Parakram and plans to do this with its Integrated Battle Groups and Mountain Strike Corps. Short of war, India has also adopted cost-imposition strategies in its military actions—the post-Uri raid and the Balakot airstrike were both portrayed as attempts to impose costs on the adversary terrorist networks in Pakistan to dissuade them from future attacks.

These principles are enshrined in the Indian Army's latest Land Warfare Doctrine, released in 2018. The official doctrine's assessment of the strategic environment is broadly accurate and consistent with those of other advanced militaries—in particular, it dutifully ticks the boxes of "gray zone" and "hybrid" war, and "techno-centric combat."[58] But these assessments are perfunctory and aspirational—and they are disconnected from the doctrine's guidance on the use of force. On the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir, the doctrine calls for "punitive response options to greater depth, effect, sophistication and precision."[59] On the "Western border" (with Pakistan), it prioritizes a very orthodox understanding of defeating the enemy for an explicitly punitive purpose: "with the aim of destroying the center of gravity of the adversary and securing spatial gains."[60] Thus, despite recognizing the changing character of the strategic environment, the doctrine document codifies the army's long-running doctrinal commitment to orthodox offensive operations.

Accordingly, the Indian military continues to be organized and equipped for executing wartime strategies of punishment or cost imposition. To seize land, which Indian leaders expect would be used as leverage in post-war negotiations, the Indian Army has built itself around large, combined-arms formations. In war, these formations would fight at the operational level, autonomous from political direction—once unleashed by the political leadership, the military's commanders would be largely left alone to set their objectives and limits.[61] Capabilities and concepts that do not contribute to this concept were and still are considered secondary throughout the system, from budget alloca-

tion to operational planning. And with the "absent dialogue" between civilian and military leaders, planning or wartime inputs from the political leadership are considered anathema; since the 1962 war, the assumption in the Indian civil-military apparatus has been that the military leadership should wage war purely in accordance with battlefield imperatives, unconcerned and unmolested by the particular strategic context of the war.[62]

Unsurprisingly, then, with few exceptions, New Delhi has in recent decades been left with an invidious all-or-nothing choice in the use of military force—either start a major conventional war or abstain from action. In the interest of avoiding dangerous escalation between nuclear powers, it is left with few usable options in the face of Pakistani and Chinese challenges. As the army commands the lion's share of personnel, defense budgets, and policymaker attention, its preferences—largely unreformed after a half century without defeat—have become India's security preferences.

India's punitive cost-imposing strategies and the ground-centric capabilities that support them are problematic for four specific reasons. First, given local military balances, India probably cannot achieve its desired battlefield effects against Pakistan or China, which is to say that it probably cannot seize significant tracts of land or inflict a decisive defeat on enemy forces. Despite a growing imbalance in aggregate national power, Pakistan retains near parity in local conventional military balances in Kashmir and Punjab, and vocally brandishes nuclear threats, so India is unlikely ever to subdue Pakistan through military force. China has an increasingly sophisticated military presence on India's border, few targets of particular strategic significance within striking distance of Indian ground forces, and a burgeoning capability to strike deep into India's rear with missiles. A limited Indian ground incursion, even if it were feasible, is unlikely to compel a Chinese capitulation. Both Pakistan and China remain highly resolved adversaries of India, with centralized political and military leaderships that are not susceptible to the level of coercive pressure India could mount.

Second, given its limited military leverage, India's cost-imposition strategies are unlikely to deter its rivals from continued subconventional provocations. Aware that Indian decisionmakers face an all-or-nothing choice, Pakistan and China have not abandoned their aggressive strategies. Pakistan continues to support and direct anti-India terrorist networks, and China continues to militarily coerce regional states, including India along their land border. Both China and Pakistan are dissuadable. Pakistan was sufficiently cowed after the 1971 war that it refrained from overt provocations in Kashmir for nearly two decades, and provisional evidence suggests that it may be effectively pressured today by a combination of international financial punishments, for example through the Financial Action Task Force. China may be incentivized to ease its coercive strategy if, for example, India deftly wields the threat of greater diplomatic and strategic alignment with the United States, but Indian military threats will not achieve these results—indeed, they have not achieved these results despite repeated attempts.

Third, these strategies are risky. India's punitive strategies have had the unintended effect of motivating its rivals to pursue more destabilizing and provocative strategies of their own. In response to the Cold Start doctrine, Pakistan has made tactical nuclear weapons an integral part of its military strategy and consistently warns that it will not hesitate to escalate a crisis past the nuclear threshold. Perhaps to preclude the possibility of a Pakistani nuclear attack, Indian strategists and planners may be developing a counterforce option to preemptively defang Pakistan's nuclear weapons.[63] A counterforce element of a cost imposition strategy—a contentious but plausible supposition—would multiply the risks already inherent in its orthodox offensive doctrine, especially while India's counterforce capabilities are still under development and unproven. In response to India's growing military presence near the Line of Actual Control, China has reinforced its border deployments and periodically seeks to revise the territorial status quo with provocative incursions, as it did most recently from April 2020.[64]

Fourth, punitive cost-imposition strategies are costly. Building the ground forces required to impose sufficient punitive costs on India's adversaries is an enormous and lengthy undertaking. The orthodox offensive doctrine, which seeks to seize enemy ground while not ceding any Indian territory, demands a large army to guard long, contested borders and to seize and hold parcels of enemy territory. This in turn demands a force structure built around large ground-holding formations to prevail in heavily contested battlespace—drawing away resources that could otherwise be spent on military modernization.[65] Large numbers of personnel have become a proxy measure of military capability in the Indian Army—as well as being a politically sensitive jobs program for the government—and their increasing cost is soaking up an ever-larger share of India's defense budget. The army has recognized the need to trim personnel excesses and improve efficiency, but proposed measures to date have been marginal. Thus, the doctrine exacts an opportunity cost, reducing India's force projection and deterrence capabilities in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian military will continue to lack the resources required for long-overdue modernization as long as the army continues to emphasize its orthodox offensive doctrine.

Recommendations for the Indian Army

As a state facing enduring rivalries and a volatile regional balance of power, it is prudent for India to retain viable options for a major conventional war, just as it is prudent for it to retain a viable option for a nuclear exchange, however ghastly such options may be. India must prepare for the most dangerous scenario, in part to deter it and in part to protect its national interests should the unthinkable happen. However, India has a lopsided preoccupation with that scenario, which is reflected in its acquisition policies, organization, and doctrine, all of which reflect its priority on large-scale conventional offensive operations. As a result, Indian military strategy is relatively ill equipped to manage more likely scenarios that may arise.

The more likely scenarios and the tools to manage them are clustered around the lower end of the conflict spectrum. On India's traditionally troubled northern continental periphery, they include subconventional and very limited conventional operations, which would focus, for example, on a strategy of denial to make cross-border enemy action either prohibitively costly or unfeasible. This may include greater use of special-forces troops, airstrikes, and armed drones. Beyond the land borders, scenarios would call for greater expeditionary air and sea capabilities in and around the Indian Ocean, and increased security cooperation with partner states to build their capacity and potentially establish "tripwire" Indian forces in the region to resist coercion. In both theaters, any new capabilities would be more effective when supported by persistent and real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) coverage, and when deployed in joint multidomain formations. In both theaters, the scenarios that demand greater Indian attention would be better addressed by denial strategies rather than by less reliable and more costly punishment strategies—presuming that India remains a status quo regional actor.

More usable military options have implications for both the costs and risks of Indian strategy. Indian planners must weigh tradeoffs between more dangerous and more likely scenarios, especially when allocating scarce resources. The Indian Army will not be able to mimic the armies of the United States or even China—it lacks the necessary means and has different goals. Should its meager capital budget allocation—which is scheduled to shrink further given pandemic-driven budget cuts—go toward building long-range precision strike and offensive cyber capabilities, or tanks and artillery for another strike corps?

Having more usable military options also has implications for risk and strategic stability in the region. India's goal is not simply to be able to use force more freely but to do so in a way that manages the risk of unintended escalation, especially as New Delhi is bent on creating space for conventional operations below the nuclear threshold. The absence of available options at the lower end of the conflict spectrum raises the risk of uncontrolled escalation, because India's existing bias favoring conventional offensive operations leaves it few alternatives other than escalating to major conventional war.

Specific recommendations for the Indian Army, to enable it to better address such scenarios, are deliberately moderate. The Indian military would surely benefit from wholesale and long-overdue structural change—ensuring, for example, that the new CDS has real planning and command authority, establishing joint theater commands, acquiring the most advanced fifth-generation technology, and cutting troop numbers. But, acknowledging that such reforms greatly increase the necessary authorities and political sensitivities, the recommendations listed here are intended for the Indian Army in particular. They are designed to require relatively modest additional resources (or to be resource-neutral if combined with some troop rationalization) and should not ruffle the feathers of the other services or the civilian bureaucracy's mandarins. The overall objective is to evolve the Indian military into a more strategically useful force. In order of most to least fundamental, the recommendations are as follows.

Consider New Theories of Victory

The traditional Indian theory of victory—a punitive cost-imposition strategy whereby land is seized to be later traded for political concessions—is based on an outmoded character of war in South Asia. The recent structural changes outlined in this paper show that major conventional wars are unlikely and should not be the primary basis of planning for the Indian military. Instead, in order to deter and defeat coercion, the Indian Army should consider rebalancing its doctrine with greater use of strategies of denial, especially at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, including against gray zone tactics. The Doklam crisis presents a valuable lesson to be learned if it can be adapted and scaled for future threats. The Indian Army should more frequently seek to make coercion and territorial revisionism prohibitively costly or unfeasible for the enemy rather than relying on ex post facto punishment.

Consider How to Be the Supporting Element of a Joint Force

Given the Indian Army's traditional focus on orthodox offensive doctrine, it has grown accustomed to considering itself the supported service—because land has been the decisive domain—with the air force and navy playing at best a supporting role. Such considerations may have been appropriate historically, but in the new strategic environment, Indian forces will be compelled to deter and fight in multiple domains and different theaters. Achieving decisive effects on the ground will not always be India's main effort—and when it is, such effects can increasingly be delivered from other domains, such as with fighter-bomber aircraft, ship-based missiles, or offensive cyber operations. The army accordingly will have an important role to play but will not always be the supported service. It should therefore consider how to play a productive role in new missions where it supports a main effort elsewhere—for example, by deploying expeditionary force protection in the Indian Ocean, logistical support in remote areas of India's northern periphery, or ground-based long-range precision strikes.

Consider New Niche Capabilities

Some new missions and roles may require incremental investment in new capabilities, but the army can make sizable and qualitatively different contributions to joint combat without having to invest in major new weapon systems such as new tanks or in large new formations. Greater investment in relatively affordable systems such as unattended ground sensors for the Line of Actual Control, or ISR drones that are datalinked to other services' forces, would pay relatively large dividends. Similarly, the army could increase its capacity for deep strikes with cruise missiles, such as BrahMos, by using relatively survivable mobile launchers. Such weapon systems, once developed and introduced, would incur relatively modest marginal additional costs for additional launchers and large magazines, and with a smaller Indian personnel footprint in enemy territory, they would be relatively less destabilizing than offensives using conventional offensive formations.

Conclusion

India and its army cannot ignore the prospect of a major war, or indeed of a simultaneous collusive threat on both fronts. It must therefore retain the capacity for major conventional operations. Given the length of India's borders and the size of Pakistan's and China's armies, this would require maintaining a sizable conventional force. However, India should prepare not only for the most dangerous scenario but also for more likely enemy courses of action. As the Indian Army's own Land Warfare Doctrine recognizes, gray zone and hybrid threats are a central feature of the contemporary and future strategic environments. Meeting those threats does not require a major resource investment; rather, most fundamentally, it requires rethinking India's traditional orthodox offensive doctrine.

As this paper has shown, Indian planners and strategists have begun the necessary discussions. However, reform efforts continue to be thwarted by the lack of formal planning processes, the organizational interests of the military, and haphazard civilian-directed change. Top-down change will remain patchy as long as political leaders focus on short-term tokens of bravado at the expense of long-term investments in modernization. Within the military, the Indian Army is presently demonstrating a notable capacity for reform with the recent establishment of a CDS, the restructuring of Army Headquarters, and the creation of IBGs, but those reforms are still designed to support the long-standing orthodox offensive doctrine that has defined the Indian Army's use of force for over half a century. Modernization is more than only new equipment and organization; it also involves new theories of victory, and doctrinal change that allows responses along the full spectrum of conflict. Punitive incursions into enemy territory, using mass and firepower, are rarely effective in wartime, and even less useful as coercive options in peacetime or crisis. If the Indian Army remains focused on conventional offensive operations, it will become increasingly irrelevant as a tool of national security policy.

About the Author

Arzan Tarapore is a nonresident fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research. In September 2020 he will join the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University as a research scholar on South Asia.

Acknowledgments

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