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A Reality Check



Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey,  
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM

# Operational Preparedness of the Armed Forces: A Reality Check

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM

## *Abstract*

*The contemporary military landscape is undergoing profound shifts, characterised by the emergence of 'Grey Zone' conflicts blending in conventional and unconventional operations. Future warfare will emphasise on ambiguity, leveraging advanced technologies and the cognitive domain as well as challenges of traditional doctrines. In this context, the Indian Army faces significant transformational imperatives, necessitating the integration of emerging technologies and multi-dimensional conflicts into its training philosophy. Geo-strategic complexities, including geopolitical realignments and regional tensions, further underscore the need for modernisation. Need for focus on jointness and the necessity for joint military structures require urgent attention. Initiatives like the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) offer opportunities for integration and efficiency. The human factor remains paramount, with efforts to rejuvenate the armed forces through innovative HR policies and training strategies.*

**Keywords:** Military Preparedness, Northern and Western Adversary, Technology

## **Introduction**

Armed forces are finding themselves at a historical inflection point. The changes in the operational environment and technology have been so significant, extensive and pervasive in the recent past, that these have collectively manifested in transformation of character of warfare that is faster, occurs at longer ranges and is more destructive. It equally targets both civilian and military domains across physical, cognitive and moral dimensions.

Future wars will be characterised by operations in the zone of ambiguity wherein nations will be neither at peace nor at war but in the 'Grey Zone', with a blend of conventional and unconventional operations in various domains. If waged effectively, as demonstrated in past few years, it will secure its objectives before the actual battle is joined or possibly in some cases even without it. The concept of warfare would expand with development of technology. Thus, options would involve application of all of national capabilities in an integrated manner, while ensuring minimum physical contact amongst forces, to conduct non-contact operations

and achieve a quick decisive victory by disrupting, denying and destroying the enemy's war waging potential.

The present land doctrine and training philosophy needs to be geared up to the demands of this new generation/ multi-domain warfare and rapid developments in disruptive technologies. Therefore, there is a need for the armed forces to transform its well established and proven training philosophy incorporating grey-zone, non-contact warfare, emerging technologies, ambiguous environment and multi-dimensional conflicts.

### **Geo-Strategic Environmental Scan**

The end of Cold War fundamentally changed the world; during most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conflicts between great powers defined global politics. Present day conflicts ranging across all continents have reinforced the belief that war is timeless. War as an enterprise has become more lethal and expensive. The number of armed conflicts being waged has doubled since World War II and nearly half of the countries in the world are involved in some form of armed conflict.

The current global and regional geo-strategic environment is complex and unique due to the hegemonic behaviour of certain power centres. The world is in the middle of a real transformation marked by a nationalistic and retreating America, a rising China, post COVID recouping economies, a divided Europe, resurgence of Russia and its conflict with Ukraine, the Israel-Hamas conflict widening to other regions like Houthi rebels targeting ships in the Red Sea, volatile Sub-Saharan region, a normalising Japan, an insecure ASEAN, Middle East sectarianism, global terrorism, international criminal empires and climate change. Economic rebalancing has now started to translate into its political manifestation which means a fundamental overhaul of the global architecture (CPR, 2020), leading to a multipolar world with agenda or intent based relationships and alliances.

India holds a geo-strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean Region as it is sandwiched between two major belligerent adversaries on the Western and Northern borders. Other regional players in the immediate neighbourhood, though friendly, are conceding to the dragon's economic lure concealing the strategic traps. Mounting regional, ethnic and religious radicalisation/ fundamentalism coupled with economic slowdown/ crisis may pave way for an armed conflict or confrontation, internally or externally. Weak democracies and hegemonic dictatorship in the subcontinent may transform into a conflict initiator largely in the realm of hybrid/ grey zone.

## Changing Character of Warfare

Wars have been a permanent and inevitable part of human history. In the era of globalisation, wars are being fought for economic reasons unlike the ideological wars of the Cold War era—the recent attempted regime change spree in Africa and West Asia are pertinent examples. Over the past two decades, the world has witnessed a fundamental shift in the way wars have been fought. The elements that shape warfare—from the weapons which are employed to the domain where the battle is fought, are at an inflection point of transformation. The very definition of what is 'war' and 'peace' has undergone a fundamental change.

There has been a gradual shift in warfare from the kinetic to the cognitive domain. The information space has become a prominent area and a medium for competition. The substantial erosion of rules-based international system has created a new and evolving implicit rule of competition and the prospect of outright victory has given way to a constant state of 'durable disorder' (Reynolds, N. and Watling, J. 2020). Rarely there has been an absolute military solution; therefore, victory is invariably defined by the triumph of the narrative and the audience often has the decisive vote (RUSI, 2016). The Russian-Ukraine war is a live example of this statement.

In Grey Zone warfare, a nation operates in the zone of low stakes and ambiguity seeking competitive advantage while keeping the adversary guessing. Operations in this domain are sufficiently ambiguous to leave the adversary unsure of his response. If the adversary does not respond adequately, it faces the prospect of a series of minor, but cumulatively significant defeats. If it does too aggressively, it risks being held responsible for unnecessary escalation. Incidentally, the Chinese have mastered the art of Grey Zone Warfare.

Disinformation and deception have been a part of warfare for thousands of years, but its metamorphic transformation has induced new irreversible dynamics across the world, that were never witnessed before. Information has long transformed from its support role to combat operations into one of its main components, primarily and sometimes exclusively, through information operations (Miller, C. 2018). Strategic communication and information influence operations have now emerged as an important domain along with land, maritime and air operations. Warfare is becoming highly networked and plays out on multiple levels and multiple domains. Future wars will be hybrid wars using sophisticated state of the art, disruptive technologies to incapacitate, degrade and overwhelm the adversary with minimal human cost and intervention.

While it is always difficult to foresee the way future war is likely to unfold, but as military leaders there is a need to develop the ability to crystal gaze and predict the contours of

likely military confrontations. A systematic evaluation of operational preparedness can enhance organisational efficiency and plug gaps in modernisation, HR management and training.

### **Threats and Challenges: Indian Context**

India's threats and challenges in the military realm stem from historically inherited territorial disputes, its geo strategic location astride the Indian Ocean Region and a tumultuous internal security environment. The collusivity amongst both the adversaries pose a threat of two front, multi- domain, hybrid war supported by an increasing component of Grey Zone Warfare by employing non-state actors and proxies with asymmetric capabilities and exploiting the technical voids in cyber and space capability. India should develop resilience in capacity and capability and deploy appropriate military means to counter any misadventure by the adversary or non-state actors— a high risk and high-cost venture. More so, for India to wield strategic influence, its formidable military force needs to be transformed into a military power capable of meeting all imminent and future challenges and emerge as a 'Net Security Provider' in the region.

Even though India has an illustrious military history and reputation, but the need to regularly appraise the performances and assess whether the nation is fully prepared to fight tomorrow's war, exists. It is time to draw lessons from experiences of the near perfect campaign of 1971 India-Pakistan War, and other campaigns like Operation PAWAN, Operation VIJAY, Operation PARAKRAM and the recent experiences on the Northern Borders. These experiences must compel the armed forces to carry out an honest reality check.

Moreover, a need also has been felt to measure up to the demands of the new generation technologies / multi-domain warfare and rapid developments in disruptive technologies. There is a need therefore for the armed forces to transform its well established and proven training philosophy incorporating grey zone warfare, non-contact warfare, emerging technologies, ambiguity filled environment and multidimensional conflicts.

Though the contemporary battlefields are being shaped by technology, innovative doctrines and concepts, and flexible organisational structures, the military culture, what is called the 'Human Factor', has largely prevented us to transit to a technology centric and responsive modern army. Therefore, in a technology driven war of the future, interspersed with belligerent posturing and intense engagements, coupled with new tools of warfare, frequent



benchmarking and auditing of capabilities and capacities will enable the armed forces to create and upgrade processes and structures to augment human and operational efficiencies.

The senior military and civilian leadership, for past two decades, has been discoursing on the significance of Multi Domain Operations (MDO). Numerous deliberations have been carried out through seminars, TV debates and articles in print and digital media. While our western adversary may be sluggish in evolving, but the real competition is on the northern borders as PLA has been modernising on a mission mode, exponentially widening the gap between the two armed forces. Many experts lay blame on budget constraints, but in reality, there is a need to have a hard look on systems and processes stalling the efforts to be a modern-day armed force.

As India faces unique, substantial and multi-domain challenges, structurally, the most pressing challenges still remains in the aspects of jointness, inter and intra service synergy, capability realignment, logistics pivots, building requisite stamina and HR policies.

### **Contours of the Future: Atmanirbharta, Civil- Military Fusion and Niche Technology**

There is a coherent view amongst various military strategists that while evolving the joint military structure, there is no need for a national security strategy document and the armed forces must not keep waiting for the document or directions from higher defence organisation or Cabinet Committee on Security. The Armed forces must exploit the appointment of CDS and formation of DMA for the integration of the military in the higher defence organisations of the country. In addition, there is also an opportunity in the form of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan' policy of the present dispensation to exploit civil-military fusion. This idea is the way ahead for defence modernisation and there is definitely a need to crystallise a roadmap through leveraging the existing ecosystem of entrepreneurship, academia and MSMEs to achieve an environment which will spur the defence acquisition process and in the long run help to contribute towards strategic autonomy.

The armed forces should leverage the flourishing commercial technology sector and rising capabilities in the field of innovations in sectors like cyber, space, artificial intelligence, nano technology etc. within the country, to drive military modernisation. Practically, the concept is not just about dual-use technology, but effective military usage of civilian facilities, technology and talent. This could mean using highways as emergency airstrips, civilian transport fleet for military logistics or emerging high-end technologies to create new weapon

systems and enhance the capabilities of older ones or attracting civilian talent and venture capital to aid military programmes (Joshi, M. 2022).

### **Human Resource Factor**

Military leadership still remains the decisive adjudicator on the present-day battlefield. Taking shelter in the comfort of tactical and operational realm limits possibilities for the military commanders. Commanders must jettison dogmatic ideas and have a measure of clarity on types of wars, which the armed forces should be prepared to fight. Synergy and integrated application amongst the services will further augment efficiency. Functioning in silos and ring-fenced turfs has no place in the modern battlefield. Modern day military leaders have to be abreast with technological developments and must have the vision to innovatively exploit disruptive technologies to achieve operational goals.

All stakeholders from various branches at Service HQs should assume the collective responsibility for enabling and ensuring transformative changes. The change must begin with correctly leveraging human resources and right sizing, as required. The man behind the weapon will eternally remain the most formidable battle winning element. 'Agnipath', the transformative HR Policy, aimed to improve battle readiness by infusing young blood, is an opportunity for us to exploit.

The new breed of young warriors will bring with them, newer competencies and proficiencies, enabling easier technical absorption. The release of Agniveers from active service while empowering nation building, will pave way for induction of fresh recruitments with up-to-date knowledge base. Induction of Mandarin qualified Territorial Army officers in the Indian Army will be a step in the right direction. The current training philosophy in turn has to align both with the new generation warfare and technological upgradation, which has shifted from kinetic to cognitive domain.

### **Capability Induction**

In view of the above, it is imperative that the armed forces are capable of operating in a Multi-Domain Operational (MDO) environment. This would expand the options available to the state, to include effective deterrence and adequate response in engagements short of armed conflict— grey zone, or timely response to a situation similar to the skirmishes along the northern borders. Therefore, a multi domain force will combine tailor made formations of networked, manned and unmanned platforms, electronic warfare, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, engineers, sustainment (logistics units), communications and

protection capabilities at all echelons, from a Section to the Theatre level. Such a force will operate below the threshold of armed conflict, penetrate and exploit windows of opportunity to break through enemy standoff capabilities and then return to routine deployment on favourable terms. A combination of following capabilities will allow the armed forces to undertake MDO: -

- Dedicated Cyber agency/ units for offensive and defensive cyber warfare.
- Next generation combat vehicle with increased firepower, mobility and survivability.
- Enhanced vertical lift capability to enhance manoeuvrability, endurance, lethality and survivability.
- Modernised networks across vast terrain.
- Modernised air and missile defence system.
- Integrated civil-military information warfare assets.
- Enhanced soldier's lethality, survivability and precision with enhanced situational awareness.
- Weapons in space domain.

While India must continuously endeavour to 'narrow the capability gap' with its northern adversary, it must simultaneously 'develop asymmetric prowess and maintain punitive capabilities' to deal with its western adversary. Optimisation of resources, identification of right capabilities, indigenisation of operational requirements, tailor-made structures, flexible processes and simplified acquisition procedures will enhance the combat efficiency.

It is imperative to reiterate that contestations in future will see extremely blurred lines between war and peace. Newer and fast emerging multiple battle domains will test inflexible military cultures. The impact of media and ensuing scrutiny will increase the challenges manifold. Therefore, desired capabilities will have to be developed both in conventional and emerging domains along with matching HR abilities.

In today's Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear and Incomprehensible (BANI) world, India needs to undergo these transformational changes on a short notice. The situation is aptly described by Chanakya's quote: -

**All Urgent call he shall hear at once,**

**But never put off; for when postponed, they will prove too hard or impossible to accomplish**



Therefore, it is extremely important to move towards a "whole of nation effort" to exploit the niche technologies along with revamped HR policies to enable the armed forces to attain MDO competence at the earliest, so that the ever-increasing gap with the northern neighbour is addressed and the advantages accrued over the years are curtailed.

Integrating technologies into military training revolutionises preparation for MDO. Embracing niche technologies and other advancements in cyber and AI domains ensure that the troops are ready to navigate the complexities of modern warfare. Ongoing innovation and investment in R&D are therefore vital to keep pace with evolving threats; by refining and expanding technology enabled training, our Army can maintain its edge in an everchanging security landscape.

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## About the Author

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios. His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



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