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Military Change

Survival of the Most Adaptable

*Ghanshyam Katoch**

“It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive but those who can best manage change.”

– Leon C. Megginson¹ (Charles Darwin)

The Greek philosopher Thucydides famously stated the proximate words: ‘The only constant [in life] is change’. (Even the most stable isotope, Tellerium-128, changes; it will decay to half its mass in 2.2 septillion years!²) Change, therefore, is inevitable and takes place in every animate and inanimate thing and becomes necessary to remain relevant in the environment that one lives in. If your enemy changes his way of fighting and you do not, then a dysfunction in countering your enemy is inevitable.

‘Military Change’ is a subject well researched in the West. There are myriad examples where lack of or delay in change led to military setbacks. Every military power has experienced this at some stage in its history. The study of military change is necessary to avoid the hazard of remaining bogged in the history of past victories and then falling prey to the oft-repeated specious wisdom ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’.

In the maintenance of vehicles, there are two philosophies: mileage repairs and breakdown repairs. Mileage repairs are done after the vehicle has covered a specified mileage. All manuals that come with vehicles

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list this out in terms of either kilometres (km) or time, in words such as ‘change engine oil after 20,000 km or after one year, whatever is earlier’. The second philosophy is simpler: only repair or replace when a component breaks down. In other words, ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. In a poor society, many owners of vehicles cannot afford mileage repairs and continue to squeeze the maximum out of their vehicles till one day it gives up on the road causing great inconvenience and even loss in terms of finances and time. While a truck broken down by the roadside can delay a shipment it cannot be catastrophic unless the load being carried is perishable and there is no insurance! In matters of national security, however, breakdown repairs do not work and no insurance company covers the risk of military defeat. The proverb ‘for the want of a nail... a kingdom was lost’, says it all.

Change theory is not a well-researched subject in Indian academic circles. Military change in the operational and organisational field is also not well researched in India, either by military scholars or civilian academics.³ It does appear in the reminiscences of retired generals but mostly in a subjective manner or in the form of self-aggrandisement, rather than with critical or objective intent. Articles do appear once in a blue moon, but they mostly seek to directly or indirectly look at subjects like ‘reform of professional military education’ or ‘human resource management’. It is indeed rare to find articles, such as the one by Nitin Gokhale in 2013⁴ that studies sociological change in the Indian military and attributes it to societal change.

There is no greater catalyst for change than a major defeat. Defeat in World War I led the Germans to develop manoeuvre warfare and blitzkrieg; and defeat in Vietnam ended the draft in the United States (US) and brought in an all-volunteer army. It also laid the basis for the policy of ‘No more Vietnams’ and hence no boots on ground, and consequently sowed the seeds of network-centric warfare. Many believe the same seeds resulted in failure to envisage another change in the nature of war and led to setbacks in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).

Change in the Indian armed forces got kick-started after the defeat in the 1962 Indo-China War. Pakistan’s defeat in the 1971 war eventually brought proxy war to Kashmir. All armies have an understandable preference to fight the next war in the manner they fought the last one—in case they won the last war. But, in case they lost the last one and still do *not* change then they *will* be defeated once more in the next one, especially if the war is with the same adversary. Indian and Pakistani

conventional war doctrines tend to mirror each other. The reason for this is that both armies have a common ancestry and in the first two wars that they fought—in 1948 and 1965—each felt that it did well and, therefore, saw no reason to change.

The evolution of the operational environment is a driver for change. The 1965 war brought in one such major change that was the result of the successful Pakistani defence of Lahore, based upon on the Bambawali–Ravi–Bedian canal (Ichhogil Canal). This made both the adversaries base their subsequent defensive strategy upon the ditch-cum-*bundh* (DCB) concept, stretching from Akhnoor in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) to the south till Rajasthan. This was based upon extensive canal/anti-tank ditch defensive lines with pillboxes on a higher bank (*bundh*⁵) on the home side and has led to an extensive Maginot Line mentality. However, whether this is good or bad is not the focus of this piece.

The Yom Kippur War brought back the value of manoeuvre battle into the Western military thought. Thereafter, books like Brigadier Richard Simpkin's *Race to the Swift* and Lieutenant General Don Starry's conception of the 'AirLand Battle' shaped Indian military thinking in the same manner as they did in most of the world which followed Western military concepts. AirLand Battle was the overall conceptual framework that formed the basis of the US Army's European warfighting doctrine from 1982 till the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) imploded in 1991 and the Cold War ended. It was also the driver for the Indian 'Brasstacks' exercise, the biggest land army manoeuvre by any country since World War II,⁶ and the push by General Krishnaswamy Sundarji for mechanisation and the evolution of the strategy of 'Holding' and 'Strike' corps.⁷ Proxy war in J&K and Pakistan's misadventure in Kargil brought in the concept of a 'limited war in a nuclear backdrop'. This, especially in the light of the experience of Operation Parakaram (2001-02), led to changes in the Indian doctrine of strike corps operations. These evolved into smaller 'battlegroups' debouching upon the enemy through a 'Cold Start'.⁸ The aim was to achieve objectives before the enemy reacted fully and the globalised world brought to bear diplomatic and economic pressure to end the war.

The AirLand Battle, as evident by its very name, was a joint war. The army could not fight it alone. On the modern battlefield, war cannot be fought by each Service singly. In some of our wars, we would have done better with presence of adequate joint structures as well as ethos. This is one sphere in which there is great scope for change in the Indian military.

The absence of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) ensures that our jointness will never be ideal. This is one area where all services fully realise the imperative of a CDS, yet inter-service rivalry and bureaucratic resistance have kept this change from fruition.⁹

Counter-insurgency (CI) is a form of war that the Indian Army has fought continuously since 1955, but started studying seriously only after the Sri Lanka experience. Indian CI tactics were initially based upon the North West Frontier Province warfare of British India against the Pathan tribes. When used in a different time and geographic and socio-cultural space in Nagaland, these were found to be inadequate and, therefore, were further refined in light of our own experience and changes elsewhere in the world. The world over, CI *strategy* is based upon the well-written British experience in Malaya, which is touted as a success. On the other hand, CI *tactics* are evolved from the mostly unwritten French experience in Vietnam and Algeria.¹⁰ The latter ensured tactical victories for both the French and the Americans in Algeria and Vietnam, but led to strategic defeats. Harry G. Summers quotes a North Vietnamese Colonel who, in the 1975 negotiations in Hanoi, after a brief rumination had replied thus to an American Colonel, when the latter pointed out that the North Vietnamese had never beaten the US Army on the battlefield: 'That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.'¹¹ The North Vietnamese Colonel was right: in war, the ultimate success is to win that war, even if individual battles are lost.

The Indian Army (like the American Army) for long subscribed to the philosophy that if one is structured and equipped for a conventional war, it is good enough to take on unconventional threats. However, the US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to an extent the Indian experience externally in Sri Lanka and internally in J&K, refutes this. The Indian Army learnt the hard way that rifles, radio sets, vehicles, web equipment and even helmets meant for conventional operations are not ideal for irregular war. When the 7.62 mm self-loading rifle (SLR) was inducted into the army post the 1962 defeat, the aim was to have a modern semi-automatic rifle to replace the antiquated .303 rifle. The experience of 1962 brought to the fore problems of resupply in mountains and the need to reduce the weight to be carried by the soldier. The original SLR had the provision to fire single shot and full automatic bursts. India went in for the single shot version only, as it was felt that it would prevent the wastage of ammunition and would also be economical. However, the CI operations in Sri Lanka, and then in J&K, exposed the inadequacy

of the single shot-firing SLR in facing irregulars armed with automatics, especially the 7.62 mm AK-47. In fact, Operation Bluestar in 1984, where the Sikh militants in the Golden Temple had a preponderance of light machine guns (LMGs) and AK-47s, should have been a wake-up call. Even at this stage, with our preoccupation with conventional operations, we inducted as the replacement for the SLR the smaller caliber 5.56 mm Indian Small Arms System (INSAS). The Western approach, in light of the AirLand Battle concept, had brought in a 'small arms philosophy', espousing that it was better to wound a soldier with a small caliber rifle than to kill him—totally forgetting that in modern conventional war, very many casualties occur due to heavier weapons and artillery. The logic was that it would tie up six to eight soldiers to evacuate the wounded soldier, effectively removing enemy soldiers from the battlefield. Still living in the past and still wanting to conserve ammunition, we went in for the INSAS capable of firing either a single shot or a two-round burst only. We learnt the hard way the following lessons: firstly, insurgents wounded with even more than one round of the INSAS may still be able to fight, and even escape. Secondly, we learnt that insurgents rarely occupy defences and fight; that engagements in CI operations are fleeting and with no time to take proper aim, a full automatic burst from the hip is more likely to hit your adversary. Finally, we learnt that the irregular enemy does not get involved in evacuating his wounded.

The period from 1982 to 1987 was splendid for change in the Indian armed forces. During this period, two consecutive Ministers of State for Defence, Brigadier K.P. Singh Deo (a serving Territorial Army officer) and Arun Singh brought much-needed strategic understanding in the Ministry of Defence. During the period 1986 to 1987, this coincided with the tenure of a visionary and proactive Chief of the Army Staff, General Sundarji. He, like Arun Singh, enjoyed a good rapport with then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. This helped General Sundarji to modernise the army, and this period is therefore rightly referred to as one of our good phases of military modernisation and organisational change.¹² It proved the point that in conventional warfighting capability, change occurs top-down as opposed to in CI operations where it is bottom-up because of lessons learnt at the tactical level.¹³ Clearly, change in the latter case is mostly evolutionary. It cannot be a 'eureka' moment à la Archimedes, or like the anecdotal revelation about gravity with the apple falling on Newton's head. Success stories like the Rashtriya Rifles¹⁴ and the anti-infiltration obstacle system (AIOS) on the Line of

Control (LoC)¹⁵ are undoubtedly organisational and strategic successes. These were totally a result of change *forced* by circumstances, *evolved* through necessity, and *refined* by the experience of far-sighted people. In the Indian Army, change is constrained by a status quoist mental make-up, for which our Professional Military Education, rigid hierarchy, and career path orientation can (and should) be apportioned part of the blame. This aspect needs greater examination because while it is easy to identify *where* change is required, it is more difficult to flesh out *what* change is required and *how* to implement it.

This article concludes with five statements which are truisms for strategic thinkers, but require reiteration for emphasising some core issues for civilian and military policymakers. Firstly, proactive change is required in the military to stay ahead of the adversaries. Secondly, change has roots in history, which demands that we learn lessons from it and usher change. Thirdly, military change cannot remain a single-service endeavour in isolation. Fourthly, change should be relevant to our unique conditions and not aped from other militaries. Finally, we must unceasingly think on and about military change. It will not take place without striving for it and it will never reach a state of equilibrium. Therefore, we must continuously evolve the existing assets, organizations and doctrine to their best capacity.

Albert Einstein is broadly credited with saying that ‘the definition of insanity is doing the *same* thing over and over again, but expecting different results’. To be sane in the sphere of military change one must do *different* things over and over again and never be at rest. Military change is sanity as it keeps military effectiveness a step ahead of the adversary.

NOTES

1. In 1963, Leon C. Megginson, a Louisiana State University professor, delivered a speech that contained a passage presenting his interpretation of Charles Darwin’s ideas. Megginson did not claim that he was quoting the words of Darwin. Nevertheless, over time, this quote has been reassigned directly to Darwin. See <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/05/04/adapt/>, accessed on 26 October 2016.
2. See ‘Isotopes of Tellurium’, available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isotopes_of_tellurium, accessed on 6 September 2016.
3. A recent book by Vivek Chadha, *Even if it ain’t Broke yet Do Fix it—Enhancing Effectiveness through Military Change*, New Delhi: IDSA and Pentagon Press, 2016, is one of the few books by Indian authors on this subject.

4. Nitin A. Gokhale, 'Changing Socio-economic Norms and its Impact on India's Armed Forces', *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2013, pp. 85–94.
5. The Hindi word for the land alongside or sloping down to a river or lake.
6. Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2010, p.56.
7. *Ibid.*, p.55.
8. 'Suggestions on Indian Army's Reorganization', *Bharat Rakshak*, available at <https://forums.bharat-rakshak.com/viewtopic.php?t=4986>, accessed on 7 September 2016.
9. Arun Prakash, 'Defence Reforms: Contemporary Debates and Issues', in V.P. Malik, Arun Prakash, Anit Mukherjee and B.D. Jayal, *A Call for Change: Higher Defence Management in India*, IDSA Monograph Series No. 6, 2012, pp. 31–32.
10. One of the rare writers was Roger Trinquier who wrote, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, Westport: Praeger Security International, 1964, which had a powerful influence on the US CI doctrine in Vietnam.
11. Quoted by Colonel Harry G. Summers in the introduction to his classic neo-Clausewitzean analysis of the Vietnam War, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, New York: Presidio Press, New York, 1982, p. 1.
12. Chadha, *Even if it ain't Broke yet Do Fix it*, n. 3, p. 39.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
14. Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Innovations in Counterinsurgency: The Indian Army's Rashtriya Rifles', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 1, March 2004, pp. 25–27.
15. Syed Ata Hasnain, 'Why the Anti Infiltration Fence on the Line of Control', *Salute*, October–November 2014, available at <http://www.salute.co.in/why-the-fence-on-the-line-of-control/>, accessed on 28 October 2016.

