

The Daily Star

Challenges for the Military Forces

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DHAKA recently witnessed a gathering of senior officers from the armies around the Asia Pacific region discussing the possible challenges that the armies face in view of the changing threat scenario. Jointly organised by the Bangladesh Army and the US Army Pacific (USARPAC), the 38th Pacific Army Management Seminar (PAMS) held on 14-17 September was attended by nearly 100 military officers, politicians, diplomats, policy makers and academicians from 34 countries. As a seminar facilitator, I had an active role in guiding the discussion, focusing on the issues and challenges and finding possible solutions. Although the seminar primarily focused on the role and challenges faced by the land forces, it was clearly understood that no army can operate on its own and that the need of close cooperation and coordination with other two services, namely Navy and the Air force, are higher than ever before. It was also evident that when the threat becomes transnational, the response too becomes multi-national, regional or even global.

In the post-Cold War era, the threat of one country invading another is diminishing. Notwithstanding disputed land or maritime boundaries, enduring ethnic and religious conflicts, conflicting claims on water and energy resources etc. nations seek peaceful dialogue, often under the auspicious of international agencies, to settle the differences. While the possibility of application of military force in traditional warfare has reduced, there have been new emerging threats that need military intervention, often beyond the border. These threats are lumped under non-traditional threats.

Non-traditional threats can be broadly put under two categories: manmade and natural. Manmade threats include: terrorism, arms and drug smuggling, human trafficking, organised crime, money laundering, cybercrime etc. Natural threats include: flood, cyclone and tidal surge, earthquake, global warming, deforestation, pollution and pandemics etc. These threats can often pose existential crisis to the nation and may demand military assistance and intervention. While the traditional role of defending the country from external and internal enemies remains the *raison de'tre* of the armed forces, they are increasingly called upon to play their part in the non-traditional roles. As such, defence forces have to bring in necessary changes in their organizational structures and force planning to fit in their new roles.

Let us take the case of terrorism. In our globalised world, the terrorism too is globalised. Terrorism has no frontier or nationality. Organisations like Al-Qaeda operate on global scale - recruiting, training, arming and launching their operatives on targets across the globe. Recent rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) has added a new dimension when the outfit occupied a huge chunk of territories of Syria and Iraq and established a reign of terror in the areas under its occupation. IS is attracting disenchanted Muslim youths from across the globe in what it terms as a “Global Jihad” against the 'infidels'. In Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria and Mali, terrorist groups control considerable area and have imposed their writ on the population. Close to us, in Pakistan, the government forces are fighting to eject Taliban fighters from its territory who have for long virtually control a large swath of territories. Fighting these terrorist forces involve appropriate tactics and strategy, weapons and materiel, training and motivation. Lack of any of these elements will call for disaster, an example of which we saw recently in Iraq when its regular forces, suffering from poor leadership and motivation, crumbled in the face of IS attack. A well-coordinated multi-national force with a long term strategy along with appropriate tactics and technology is the answer. However, it is easier said than done; inter-state rivalry and distrust often hinder regional or international cooperation in countering a common threat.

Arms and drug smuggling often go hand in hand with armed insurgency and terrorism. Taliban in Af-Pak border thrive on opium export and use the fund to buy sophisticated weapons in the black market. There is a strong nexus in our part of the world between drug and arms smugglers of Myanmar with the Islamic militants in Bangladesh and Maoist insurgents in India and Nepal. Ideological, religious and ethnic differences pose no barrier here. Those who are involved in arms and drug smuggling are often involved in human trafficking too. To support all their illegal activities, they have to clandestinely collect and transfer funds through forged documents and bank accounts. Therefore, keeping a check on money laundering is a major task of the security forces. Military forces have a clear role in supporting all these counter terrorism activities.

The crux of the matter is our army will have to work with other military forces which had been hitherto been classified as hostile. Imagine a scenario where the Indian and Pakistani forces are working together under UN flag and in case of need one force risking their lives to defend the members of another. Notwithstanding the national differences, there is a need to develop “Brotherhood in Arms” within the military psyche. We need to

develop regional and international institutions that will focus on how best military forces of different nations could operate under a joint umbrella to combat common threats, be it natural or manmade. There is also the need to develop inter-governmental and intra-governmental coordination to better exploit the military forces inherent capability to combat non-traditional threat. In our region, we might hold joint civil-military exercises under the umbrella of SAARC, BIMSTEC, ASEAN etc where doctrines and interoperability could be tested and improved. Only being relevant to the emerging threats could the military forces justify its existence.