

## [AGNIPATH, BETWEEN THE LINES](#)

India lacks a National Security Doctrine. Armed Forces have remained outside ambit of reform

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/agnipath-scheme-armed-forces-protests-7979936/>

by



**Admiral Arun Prakash,**

former Chief of Naval Staff (CNS)

**Email ID: [Admiral Arun Prakash <arunp2810@yahoo.com>](mailto:arunp2810@yahoo.com)**

**SO DREADFUL IS the prospect of military defeat**, and so horrifying its consequences, that, nations are willing to go to any length to avoid such an outcome. It is for this reason that National Security has been historically deemed, worldwide – by economists and not by soldiers – as “the first charge on the treasury”.

Independent India, unfortunately, saw defense expenditure being relegated to the “non-planned” category, within the ambit of a Soviet-inspired central economy. In another anomaly, the Pension Bill of Veteran Soldiers– a separate charge on the exchequer – was linked to the defense budget and its (inevitable) growth trotted out as an excuse for the dwindling funds available for Force Enhancement and hardware replacement / modernization.

Thus, for years, governments dragged their feet, for “want of resources”, over the army’s demand for a Mountain Strike Corps. But ironically, the 2020 Chinese incursions in Ladakh resulted in the deployment of 50,000-60,000 troops –over a Corps strength– and the outflow of huge unplanned expenditure to support this indefinite deployment.

**The most disheartening aspect of this situation has been the fact that the Finance Ministry, instead of finding ways and means of raising essential additional funds for national defense, has passed the buck to the Armed Forces and demanded that they evolve measures for reducing the Pension Bill. One presumed that the Agnipath scheme, launched with much fanfare, is an outcome of this demand.**

But rather than engage in a critique of this controversial project, which has already seen much debate, controversy and public disturbances, I would like to focus on two large issues, which lie at the root of much that is wrong with our approach to national security.

Every nation faces the eternal “guns versus butter” dilemma and has to find its own way to resolve what the US military terms the “ends-ways-means” conundrum. All major powers undertake a periodic review (every 4-5 years) of their evolving national security objectives, the options available, and the economic / military means available for achieving them. Such reviews automatically generate assessments of existing / potential adversary threats to national interests as well as the state of our own militaries, material / operational readiness.

From here, it is a short step to the estimation of the military capabilities required and the funding support that the nation will need to generate. Apart from providing fiscal guidance, this process also facilitates the evolution of a National Security Strategy. Our neighbourhood adversary, China, has since 2002 been issuing with unfailing regularity a biennial “Defence White Paper”, which encapsulates all of the foregoing, and is available on the Internet; for the information of foes and friends alike.

The Govt of India, on the other hand, has neglected to undertake any such an exercise in the past 75 years. It has thereby deprived itself, and the taxpayer, of a holistic national security picture of: (a) where we stand; (b) where we want to go; and (c) how do we intend to get there? **Unsurprisingly, India is among the few major powers that have failed to issue a National Security Strategy or Doctrine, and is consequently seen offering fumbling responses to emergent threats as well to financial stringency in their security domain.**

A second fact that we need to face is that our armed forces have remained in a Second World War time warp, as far as their organization and doctrines are concerned. Halfhearted attempts at organizational reform have come to naught due to the lack of political will, as well as, internal resistance from the Services; with the constitution of a Chief of Defence Staff and creation of a Department for Military Affairs providing the latest examples.

However, the most troubling lacuna is that our 1.4 million-strong army has neither benefited fully from the “revolution in military affairs” of the 1980-2000 era; nor learnt all the lessons of the ongoing “hybrid warfare”; and remains fixated on the “boots on the ground” syndrome. Given the transformed nature of the warfare, downsizing of the Indian Army, by substituting manpower with smart technologies and innovative tactics, has become an imperative need. Against this backdrop, a Scheme on the lines of Agnipath, appropriately constituted and focused on enhancing “combat effectiveness” rather than effecting “saving” or “generating employment”, could have triggered a reformative process. But a number of caveats, need to be borne in mind, in this context.

Firstly, given the parlous security situation on the country’s Northern and Western borders, as well as ongoing domestic turbulence, this is not the best time to cast the Armed Forces - already short of manpower - into turmoil, with a radical and untried new recruitment system.

Secondly, such a scheme, in its present form, is suitable only for the army, whose large infantry component is not excessively burdened with technology. In the case of the Navy and Air Force, it must be recognized that 5-6 years are required before a new entrant can acquire enough hands-on experience to be entrusted with the operation or maintenance of lethal weapon systems and complex machinery and electronics.

Thirdly, no matter how extensively the issue was discussed in meetings or files, a radical change of this nature should have had been subjected to a trial, before service-wide implementation. Ideally, a few units of the Regular or Territorial Army could have been earmarked as a testing ground and feedback obtained.

Lastly, the bitter experience of the past has shown that the Home Ministry has resisted the induction of Ex-Servicemen in to the Armed Police and Paramilitary Forces, on the grounds, that it would spoil the career path of their own cadres. Similarly, State Governments and other agencies have blatantly ignored the reservations mandated for ESM. Therefore, if the Agnipath scheme has to offer a meaningful promise of post-demobilization employment or education, it must be mandated by an act of Parliament, on the lines of the "GI Bill" enacted by the US Congress.

In conclusion, seeing the detritus of burnt trains, wrecked buses and social turmoil, often seen in the wake of many recent pronouncements, one is left wondering whether dissenting opinions are tolerated and contrarian advice accepted or given any weightage in our high-level-decision-making forums.

**The writer is former Chief of Naval Staff**