

'Critical Hollowness'

Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal on India's Defence Preparedness



The contract for 145 BAE M777 ultra-light howitzers was the first Indian artillery order in over three decades

With attempts at infiltration being made virtually every night and frequent exchanges of small arms and artillery fire, the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan is more active than it has been in the last five years. The number of terrorist attacks in Kashmir has also risen sharply this summer. The stand-off with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at Doklam has stretched to two months. The rhetoric being spewed out by the Chinese government-controlled media is getting shriller by the day. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) now under construction will lead to further increase in their military collusion.

The net effect of India's deteriorating security environment will be that the country will be confronted with a two-front situation during future conflict. With the dogs of war barking in the distance, in

July, the comptroller and auditor general (CAG) of India released a disquieting report about continuing ammunition shortages. There are large-scale deficiencies in other important military items of equipment as well. Addressing the inadequacies in the state of India's defence preparedness, termed as 'critical hollowness' by former army chief General VK Singh, merits the government's urgent attention.

Deficiencies in ammunition have an adverse impact on the ability to sustain military operations over the period of time that is necessary. According to the CAG, in March 2013, 50 per cent of the different categories of weapons (including tanks and artillery guns) had stocks for less than ten days of fighting. Since then, there has been some improvement, but for 40 per cent of its weapons, the army still holds stocks for less than ten days of conflict.

The Kargil conflict in 1999 lasted 50 days and we must acknowledge that any future border conflict may also be prolonged. During the Kargil conflict, 50,000 rounds of 155 mm artillery ammunition had to be imported from South Africa. The occurrence of such a critical situation during a time of crisis must be avoided through a prudent replenishment and stocking policy.

The army's sister services are no better off. While the Indian navy is far from acquiring the capabilities of a blue water navy, the People's Liberation Army navy is getting ready to sail into the Indian Ocean, and is acquiring bases and port facilities in fast-forward mode. Over the last five years, the Indian navy has had major accidents on board submarines INS *Sindhurakshak* and INS *Sindhuratna*. In another accident, submarine batteries that should have been replaced much earlier were still being