

In good hands

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Introduction:

Every year, on January 11, the Army Chief holds a media interaction and responds to media queries related to India's military-strategic security issues, ranging from how borders were being handled against specific threats to internal security issues.

The Manipur Violence and J&K insurgency was the prime focus

The situation in Manipur:

1. The Chief was emphatic in saying that in Manipur, the level of violence had decreased and that the Army was working with several central and state agencies to restore the situation.
2. Yet, the fact that of the 5,000-odd small arms stolen from state police armouries, only about 30 per cent of the weapons have been recovered, confirms the challenge before the Assam Rifles and the Army's III Corps.
3. The situation remains volatile at the Indo-Myanmar border, too. That volatility adds complexity.
4. In addition, the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with Myanmar permits movement of border populations up to 16 km on either side of the border without visas; only permits are required.
5. This, too, facilitates infiltration by undesirable and anti-national elements, along with smuggling of narcotics and contraband.
6. The potential of negative situations remains high and the Chief expressed concern on the fact that only 20 Assam Rifles (AR) units are available for border sealing; others remain on the counter-insurgency (CI) grid and work in conjunction with other forces.
7. What the Chief did not mention is the fact that AR units, by virtue of their near permanent deployment in the Northeast, are the best geared to handle the situation.
8. This is one entity which can do with expansion, considering the scope for proliferation of security issues in the Northeast.

The institution of the Army took a hit in Manipur:

1. Complaints against their lack of neutrality and bias towards one community or the other are an inevitable part of CI operations, where efforts to counter an effective force such as AR will invariably be made.
2. The Army has to resist this since the management of AR has always remained a contentious subject.
3. The Manipur turbulence is likely to persist as ethnic battle lines are drawn up and remain even more complex than when the issue took centre stage in May 2023.
4. Thus far, it has remained restricted to some states in the Northeast, but unless tackled

robustly, has the potential to spread to various areas, bringing chaos across the vulnerable Northeast.

5. It is good that PM Sheikh Hasina's electoral victory in Bangladesh ensures no interference from that quarter but something more permanent needs to be worked out to neutralise the potential of external support.
6. The Chief's clarity is encouraging but this will need to be integrated with political and social narratives to take it to a successful end.

The situation in J&K is improving:

1. The Army Chief was frank about the situation in J&K, terming it to be a concern.
2. It's a welcome admission that in no way smacks of negativity.
3. In fact, only if the threats are realistically assessed will there be more pragmatic solutions, all available in the Army's vast repertoire of experience.
4. The attitude reflected by the Chief is indeed a welcome departure from the defensive and routine responses that sometimes emanate from professional quarters.
5. It's refreshing to see admission by the Army's highest office that "there were tactical lessons to be learnt from the series of setbacks in the region, which claimed the lives of 20 soldiers in the past year in ambushes by terrorists, and that the Army is studying tactics employed by the adversaries in the area".
6. The abysmal ratio of losses to achievements, perhaps one of the highest of the long J&K counter-proxy campaign, needs a fresh approach.
7. General Pande's mature outlook and raksha mantri's deep support for winning hearts and minds augur well for the coming years.

The abnormal situation of the LAC:

1. There is the entire gamut of issues of the northern borders with China along the LAC.
2. At the Indo-China border Indian Army's deployment is robust and balanced, this was also indicated by Chief's statement.
3. Although efforts are being made by both sides to reduce the tension.
4. But Indian policy makers know that unless a massive reduction of troops from the Chinese side and destruction of permanent construction in the bordering area on the Chinese side does not happen, any signalling of normalisation will not work.
5. While China has attempted to coerce India, it has not succeeded, although it perceives it has put us on the defensive.
6. India has kept its options open, without going overboard in any direction.
7. What the Army Chief needs to do is to keep the Army in a high state of readiness, reorder force structuring for the optimum response to two-front threats and avert any tactical and sub-tactical triggers which can upset the apple cart.

Conclusion:

The Chief must also prepare his force for the inevitable technology transformations and even for what may appear mundane — threats from climate change. With regard to the latter, not many will advise him but the wise need no push on issues which stare them in the face.