

The many integral components of National Defence: Why a Country's Socio-Economic Structure is as Important as its Military Forces

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For many decades, students of military affairs have widened their perspective to include new variables in their assessments of the security framework of their own countries and others. Renowned military figures have often donned different disciplinary and academic hats as they have seamlessly bridged the divide between purely military studies and other relevant subjects. It is not the intention of this writer in this essay to go back in time and study the great scholars and generals who had done pioneering work in this field. In our country, we have only to remember Chanakya (Kautilya) and his epic works, *Arthashastra* and *Chanakya*. It is sufficient to say that our ancient civilisation saw seminal studies in the areas of statecraft and military strategy.

The *Arthashastra* discusses monetary and economic policies, as well as national welfare, international relations and military strategies. The book spells out the duties of a ruler and has been recognised as one of the pioneering studies on this intricate subject. As is usual with ancient history, there are alternative narratives. Some scholars suggest that *Arthashastra* is actually a compilation of a number of earlier texts written by various authors, and Chanakya might have been only one of these authors. Be that as it may, this study is certainly a key work that has survived the test of time. Though not at the same level of erudition

and insight, *Chanakya Niti* is a collection of aphorisms, said to be selected by Chanakya from the various shastras. This study, too, provides a lot of information on how the great scholar viewed the entire socio-political canvas.

The Greeks too, had scholars, emperors and generals who studied these two closely-linked fields of society and defence. War was an overriding phenomenon in Greek civilisation, determining to a great extent the political, social, and economic institutions, in a permanent interaction with society and politics. According to Heraclitus, “war is the father of all and king of all”. However, this extreme perspective was sought to be countered by the awareness of its disastrous impact on citizens and the country as a whole. The Greeks frequently oscillated between the view that war is inevitable and that it had horrible results. The Greeks, thus, had an ambivalent approach to war, much as Chanakya and his followers did in India.

We now have to fast-forward to the enormous volume of theoretical and academic work that has been done on social and political conflict within countries from the mid-19th century onwards, because these are the concepts that are now relevant. The fundamental issue is the following: what is the basis of political conflict in a given society? The debate carries on to the two related subjects that can broadly be summarised as follows:

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in a given society or country, which groups are the primary contenders for political benefits? Secondly, what are the main opposing political ideologies in that country / society?

Stratification in a given society is not just driven by class in the Marxian sense but also by status, as enunciated by the other great sociologist, Max Weber. I do not propose to get into the intricate debate about which theory is more appropriate. The general consensus is that both the Weberian approach and the Marxian one is relevant and complement each other. Thus, there are actually three dimensions in social stratification, namely class, status and power.

For the lay reader, I must point out briefly the nuances in this theory. Often, class and status coincide, but not always. Easy examples to cite are impoverished aristocrats and rejected parvenus / social climbers. In many instances, status is a lagged outcome of class – affluence and riches come first and status later. Readers in India will readily recognise this phenomenon. The “power” dimension in sociology kicks in when we look at prosperous industrialised countries where this is an important variable in the generation of social conflict.

We now have to proceed to the key issue that is sought to be addressed in this essay. The basic question is the following: what makes some states more militarily powerful than others? In most of the studies on international relations and defence analyses, the general thrust is that military power is a direct product of material resources. The latter is usually quantified in terms of a country’s defence budget, military forces, or gross domestic product (GDP).

Increasingly, a lot of the research being done

currently focuses on a number of non-material factors that significantly affect the ability of countries to render their resources into fighting power. In particular, recent studies suggest that democratic political institutions, high levels of human capital, and amicable civil-military relations significantly enhance the quality and level of military power.¹ If this line of thinking is correct, we will have to concede that military strength is not solely or even primarily determined by material resources. Ipso facto, the numerous theoretical and empirical studies that were based on this assumption are flawed.

In fact, neither of these two lines of thinking is totally correct. Purely materialist conceptions of military power are unsound because they ignore military effectiveness. There is clear evidence that some countries are consistently better in converting physical assets and technological prowess into effective military power. Others display endemic weaknesses, while the rest have variations in their war-fighting capabilities over time. In short, a country’s level of military effectiveness depends not only upon the quantum of its physical resources, but also on how well it employs these resources for military purposes. The materialist view only takes the former into account and is therefore critically flawed when it comes to measuring military capability.

Yet, the alternative view – that military capability is, to a significant extent, a product of political and social factors – also suffers from a major shortcoming. In particular, every study in this body of scholarship overlooks the most crucial ingredient of military power: economic development. This omission is especially troubling

because Western democracies with high levels of human capital and low levels of civil-military frictions also rank among the most economically developed states in the world. It is entirely plausible, therefore, that the correlations found between these political and social factors and military effectiveness are spurious.

In hundreds of battles and wars between 1898 and 1987, countries with higher levels of economic development consistently outfought less developed opponents. This is not surprising. What is surprising is that many of the political and social factors that were claimed to affect military capability either seem to be irrelevant or have the opposite effect of that found in previous studies. When economic development is taken into account, culture and human capital become insignificant and democracy actually degrades war-fighting capability. In short, the conventional military dominance of Western democracies stems primarily from superior levels of economic development, not societal pathologies or political institutions.

This finding qualifies both the major views of military power.² For the traditional materialist view, this article suggests that a country's degree of development – not just the size of its economy, defence budget, or military – is an important ingredient for military success. In other words, military power is a function of both quantity and quality; states of comparable size may still differ in their level of military power because economically developed states field more effective forces. For the alternative view, these findings suggest that military power is rooted in a state's economy rather than its political institutions, culture, or education system. While economic development

may not be the only determinant of military effectiveness, it seems to be the primary determinant. Therefore, a conception of military power that takes into account both the quantity of a state's resources and the state of its economic development provides a sound basis for defence planning and strategy for international relations.

Understanding what makes some countries more militarily powerful than others is also important for prudent policy-making. Let us take the example of the security implications of China's rapid economic development. If economic development is the key ingredient for an effective military, then the growth of China's economy is synonymous with the expansion of its military potential. But if China's authoritarian political institutions systematically undermine its ability to turn resources into military power, then the security threat posed by its economic rise may be less menacing than what many observers worry about. Since vital decisions regarding grand strategy, alliance commitments, threat assessment, military doctrine, budget allocation, and the use of force are based on such determinations, the study of military power deserves the most incisive and rigorous research that modern scholarship can provide.

The existing literature offers two main answers to the central question of this article: why are some states more militarily powerful than others? The first and most prevalent hypothesis is that military power is a direct function of material resources. Many of the conventional texts, for example, consider the relative quantity of material resources – troops, defence expenditures, GDP, population, industrial base – to be the main determinants of state behaviour.³

Other studies, however, have shown quite convincingly that these material indicators fail to predict or explain actual combat outcomes. In numerous wars and individual battles, sides with fewer resources have outfought and defeated materially superior opponents. Prior to the 1991 Gulf War, military analysts employed the best available net assessment methods to predict casualty ratios, but the best overestimated American loss was by a factor of three; the next best was off by a factor of six; and the majority were also way off the mark. These types of failures motivate an alternative conception of military power that takes into account not only the quantity of a nation's material resources, but also how effectively it uses these resources in battle.

Stephen Biddle, for example, argues that militaries that employ what he calls the 'modern system' – a tightly interrelated complex of cover, concealment, dispersion, suppression, small-unit independent manoeuvre, and combined arms at the tactical level, and depth, reserves, and differential concentration at the operational level – are more likely to carry out successful operations, even against materially preponderant enemies. Similarly, Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy stressed the role of less tangible factors, such as morale, leadership, and training, in his influential models and writings on military power. And political science studies find that strategy, doctrine, and tactical force employment have decisive effects on combat outcomes.

The key point made by all of these studies is that the manner in which military force is employed mediates the relationship between material strength and military power. Simplistic 'bean counts' of weapons and troops are poor measures of modern

military capability. More fundamental to such assessments are the quality of equipment, the skill of the soldiers, and the degree and efficiency of organisations. A country's military power, therefore, is a function of two things: its quantum of material resources and how effectively it can translate these resources into force, a process that is referred to as 'military effectiveness'. Military effectiveness, therefore, is the crucial link between materiel and military power, between what a country's resources suggest it could do and what it can actually do in a real war.

Recent studies, however, suggest that a host of political and social factors may systematically degrade or enhance a state's military effectiveness, thereby causing some wealthy states to squander their resources, while allowing some poor states to realise disproportionate and inordinate amounts of force. Material factors may represent a state's potential level of military power, but non-material factors significantly affect its actual level of military power. It follows from this view that the largest or wealthiest states, or even the states with the highest defence budgets, do not necessarily possess the most military might.

To date, this research has focused on four variables – regime-type, culture, civil-military relations, and human capital – though other factors such as ethnic divisions and international relationships have also received attention. Concerning regime-type, Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam find that democracies win more battles than non-democracies and explain these results by producing statistical evidence that link democratic political institutions to superior leadership and initiative on the battlefield.

It has been observed that cultures shape military performance, either because armies reflect the norms and structures of their societies, or because efforts taken to divorce militaries from their societies have consequences for the amount of usable military power available to the state. For example, Ruth Benedict linked the ferocious, suicidal defences of Japan during World War II to Japanese concepts of honour and shame. More recently, Kenneth Pollack argued that Arab cultural pathologies explain Arab militaries' poor tactical initiative, weak combined arms practices, intelligence failures, inability to perform tactical manoeuvres and systematic displays of individual bravery.⁴ This finding is partially supported by Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long's quantitative analysis, in which the authors find that states with Muslim and Buddhist cultures perform poorly in battles against Western adversaries.

Several studies suggest that the nature of a state's civil-military relations has decisive impact on the amount of military power it can produce.⁵ In countries in which civil-military relations are rancorous and combative, civilian leaders may adopt self-defensive measures that purposefully undermine the military's unity and proficiency. Such interventions include purges of the officer corps and promotion of officers on the basis of loyalty rather than merit, suppression of communications, isolation from foreign sources of expertise or training, and encouragement of divisions within and among different services. These policies may help insulate the regime from military coups, but they systematically reduce the will and capacity of soldiers to pursue apolitical military proficiency.

The final non-material determinant of military

effectiveness to receive scholarly attention is human capital. Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long suggest that better-educated soldiers may be more receptive to training, more adept at operating and maintaining sophisticated machinery, and more capable of executing tactical manoeuvres on the battlefield. In support of this hypothesis, the author finds that developed states with high levels of primary and secondary education perform better than the less educated enemies on the battlefield.

Taken together, these studies suggest that socially-stable democratic countries with low levels of civil-military friction, and high levels of human capital, should be soldier-for-soldier, rupee-for-rupee more militarily powerful than states that lack these characteristics. The potential implications of these findings are immense, not only for the study of military power, but for the entire field of international relations: if political and social factors decisively shape the creation of military power, then the large number of academic theories and policy assessments based on materialist conceptions of military power may be seriously flawed.

In the Indian scenario, this writer has, in a recent essay, identified and assessed the present socio-political and economic fabric of our country. In my considered view, the following are the principal interest and pressure groups that are currently operating in our country:

- Crony capitalists ranging from the top business groups to the local kirana shop, all of whom thrived on tax evasion and looting the financial institutions.
- The managers of rural — often caste-based — vote banks, who do not want their roles as intermediaries to be diminished.

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- Religious pressure groups, often financed from abroad and whose allegiances are to institutions based outside India.
 - The bureaucracy at all levels.
 - The judiciary, from the top to the bottom.
 - Small/regional political parties that have acted as power brokers in some parts of the country and have built up critical mass and a war-chest of funds.
 - “Intellectuals” and academicians who had long sipped from the deep pool of resources supplied by the previous regime.

Readers must be reminded once again that this list is not organised in any order of priority and/or importance. Moreover, the above groups invariably work in tandem with each other. If we look at this scenario, clearly India does not

presently have a socio-economic fabric that jells very well with the requirements of an effective military machine that the various studies, discussed earlier, predicate. However, the saving grace is our military, comprising people who have developed their own ethos and capabilities, despite the odds stacked against them.

Our armed forces seem to have overcome the debilitating governance system that we possess. They have somehow delivered a level of performance that would defy the laws of probability. For this, the nation’s ordinary citizens should heave a sigh of relief and thank the cosmic forces for their benediction. However, it does not absolve them of their responsibility to strive for a distinctly better support system for their warriors and defendants.

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- 1 *Michael Beckley (2010) Economic Development and Military Effectiveness, The Journal of Strategic Studies, 33:1, 43-79*
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Kenneth M. Pollack, 'The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness', PhD dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1996, 37–82, 541, 586, 579..*
- 5 *Ibid.*

