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Cold Start: India to Deploy Massive Tank Army Along Border With Pakistan

The Indian Army plans to deploy almost 500 main battle tanks along the India-Pakistan border.

By Franz-Stefan Gady
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The Indian Army is set to deploy over 460 new T-90SM main battle tanks (MBTs) along India's border with Pakistan, senior Indian defense officials told *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly* on January 19.

The new T-90SM MBT (other designations T-90AM or T-90MS) is the latest and most modern version of the T-90 (which in turn is a modernized variant of the T-72 MBT), and has specifically been designed for export by Russia.

According to *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, the newly ordered MBTs will supplement 850-900 license-built T-90S Bhishma tanks, divided into 18 regiments, and currently deployed in the Indian states of Rajasthan and Punjab. It is unclear how many T-90S and T-90SM in total are currently in service with the Indian Army. (Estimates vary from 800 to 1,200 MBTs in various stages of operational readiness.)

The new MBTs will be equipped with new thermal imaging sights and will be divided up into ten new regiments.

India has been mulling the purchase of 464 T-90SM MBTs for the past year. According to an Indian media report from November 2016, the contract “will include a Make-in-India element for integration at the Heavy Vehicles Factory in Avadi near Chennai.” However, the purchase has not yet been cleared by the Defense Acquisition Council, headed by Indian Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar.

The Indian Army already maintains a sizeable tank force along the India-Pakistan border. However, the recent news that New Delhi intends to modernize its tanks formations along the border could indicate that India continues to methodically implement its so-called Cold Start Doctrine of limited conventional war with Pakistan.

This doctrine, which as *The Diplomat* reported has never been officially acknowledged until recently, calls for swift and decisive conventional offensive operations into Pakistani territory before the international community can intercede, and before Pakistan would feel compelled to launch tactical nuclear retaliatory strikes in the event of an invasion.

Tanks play a pivotal role in Cold Start as they are the key offensive assets to launch limited but rapid armored thrusts into Pakistani territory supported by mechanized infantry formations and air power within 48-72 hours at the outset of a military confrontation with Islamabad.

A number of military maneuvers over the past decade has shown that the Indian Army’s reliance on its so-called three Strike Corps (each consisting of two armored and one infantry division with approximately 450 MBTs per corps) to conduct Cold Start offensives took away the surprise element—the key ingredient in such Blitzkrieg-style operations—given that they were slow to mobilize and stationed too far in the interior of India.

As a result, the Indian Army decided to implement structural and organizational changes. First, it decided to prop up its defensive corps (so-called Pivot Corps) stationed along the border with Pakistan with new offensive elements: division-sized integrated battle groups (IBG) consisting of artillery, armor, and aviation elements capable of limited offensive operations.

Second, the Indian Army also decided to disaggregate the three strike corps into division-sized IBGs and station them closer to the border. These IBGs, equipped with artillery, armored personnel carriers, MBTs, and infantry fighting vehicles, would be capable of launching limited strikes (50-80 kilometers deep) into enemy territory supported by air power.

To date, these changes have only partially been implemented due to a number of reasons including logistical problems and shortages of key equipment (e.g., self-propelled artillery). It is likely that the newly ordered T-90SM MBTs will be used for the IBGs. However, the MBTs alone will not suffice to put the Cold Start Doctrine from what up till now primarily appears to be a concept into actual reality.