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India's Military Inferiority Complex

By Trefor Moss

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Indian officials are preoccupied by China's growing military power. They would do better to fix their own incoherent defense establishment.

Modern India is economically and strategically buoyant, and has every reason to feel confident as the 21st century progresses. So it's strange to think that this same confident place is developing an inferiority complex over China's military power.

Never mind that New Delhi just announced a hefty **13 percent defense budget** increase for 2012-13, or that the country is now the world's **biggest importer** of military systems. Most Indian commentators seem to have digested these two pieces of news by focusing on the downside: that the country's \$39 billion defense budget remains quite modest compared with the \$106 billion military budget at China's disposal.

The critics should bear two things in mind before giving into defense budget envy. First, a 13 percent increase is actually very generous in the context of an Indian economy that's only expected to grow by **7.6 percent** in the coming year. Larger increases aren't only unaffordable but also strategically untenable, as they would alarm neighboring countries.

Second, the Indian military has long since accepted two facts of strategic life: that the Chinese military will always be bigger; and that it will always be richer.

That doesn't mean the Chinese military will necessarily be better, and overcoming the comparative disadvantages of wealth and scale is what Indian military strategy, at least vis-à-vis China, is all about. The solution comes in two parts. First, the Indian military knows it has to focus on quality rather than quantity, investing in weapon systems that China, hindered by international arms embargoes, cannot match. It then also means capitalizing on regional unease about China's rise and on forging smart alliances. China might be more powerful, but India knows it can be more popular.

The Indian media is therefore over hasty in viewing defense matters through the China inferiority lens. *The Times of India*, for example, headlined last week's defense budget announcement by bemoaning the fact that the "[Military plays catch-up but China \[is\] a long march ahead.](#)"

That's a self-defeating way to look at things. The important questions Indians should be asking are whether their government is giving defense the resources it needs – and based on successive double-digit spending increases, you'd have to say that it is; and whether that money is being used wisely to bankroll a coherent military modernization strategy. It's when you look more closely at this second point that you begin to appreciate that India – not China – is its own worst enemy.

Writing in the *Business Standard*, Ajai Shukla [observed](#) this week that the Indian Army is being starved of funds, while the Navy and Air Force soak up all the investment. Indeed, the numbers don't look good from the Army's perspective. The Air Force has a capital expenditure to operational cost ratio of two to one; the ratio for the Navy is about three to two. By contrast, the Army spends six times as much on day-to-day running costs as it does on new equipment.

However, such ratios are a fact of life when you have an army of over a million active personnel whose poor pay and conditions you are attempting to upraise over time. China, with its 2 million increasingly well-paid troops, has exactly the same headache of rising everyday bills eating away at budget increases. And there's also no getting away from the fact that India, despite its expanding resources, can't buy everything at once. With several costly Air Force and Navy programs currently underway, such as the [procurement of the Dassault Rafale fighter](#) and new naval frigates, the Army has been obliged to wait in line. Now, it can rightfully claim to have moved to the front of the queue.

Of greater concern is the tenacious ineptitude of India's defense bureaucracy. In the last financial year, as in most others, the Defense Ministry failed to spend all of the cash at its disposal thanks purely to red tape. That's the first thing that needs to be fixed.

The government then needs to redouble its efforts to introduce a functioning procurement system. More often than not, India's attempts to buy equipment become tortuous and wasteful. In January, Army Chief Gen. V.K. Singh, himself a [recent victim](#) of his country's eccentric bureaucracy, [suggested](#) wearily that, "the procurement game is a version of snakes and ladders where there is no ladder but only snakes, and if the snakes bite you somewhere, the whole thing comes back to zero." His exasperation centered on the army's efforts, initiated 10 years ago, to buy new artillery; the process has just resulted in the [blacklisting](#) of six foreign defense contractors but, as yet, no new guns.

Another example is the acquisition of 75 much-needed Pilatus PC-7 Mk II trainer aircraft, announced last year, which now [faces delays](#) – like so many procurements before it – over allegations of irregularities in the bidding process. Worryingly, though perhaps predictably, questions are now also being asked about the flagship Rafale procurement.

Third, the government should re-evaluate the role of the domestic defense industry, which currently does a lot of things badly. It should be made to start doing a few things well. India's Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) recently [complained](#) that it doesn't have enough money – but that has never been its problem. The agency has a track record of initiating overambitious programs and then executing them poorly, as the [travails of the Tejas light combat aircraft](#), to name but one example, continue to demonstrate. For the sake of both the taxpayer and the military, the Defense Ministry should focus the DRDO and the defense industry on developing a realistic core of indigenous capabilities, and then just import everything else.

So India is wrong to feel inferior just because China has more soldiers and more money. The problem is the incoherence of India's defense establishment, from industry through to government – therein lies the inferiority. It's a danger to Indian security that has nothing to do with China, and that's within India's own power to put right.