

# Mounting tensions between India's army and civilian government

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In pursuit of “world power” status, India's elite is lavishing ever greater funds and attention on the Indian military. Emboldened by this newfound importance, India's military has grown more assertive.

Over the past several years, Indian military commanders have repeatedly made provocative statements against China and Pakistan that appear to be at odds with the policy of the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government. Last year, for example, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had to publicly state that India would not seek to emulate the U.S.'s example in mounting an illegal raid inside Pakistan to kill Osama Bin Laden, after at least one senior Indian officer had publicly boasted that India's military is capable of pulling off such a mission.

Relations between the army top brass and the civilian government are especially fractious. So fractious that, according to a recent front page exclusive in the well-connected *Indian Express* (IE), some in the government became spooked when the army made unauthorized troop movements near New Delhi, the country's capital, last January. Although the newspaper did not explicitly say so, the article hinted that a section of the civilian leadership thought that an ill-conceived coup attempt might be underway.

According to the paper, two units of the Indian Army moved towards New Delhi in the early morning hours of January 16-17 without informing the government, causing the civilian leadership to become alarmed. For 18 hours the government was concerned enough to take countermeasures, including posting lookouts to report on the troops' movements and declaring a terror alert so as to allow the police to erect roadblocks and thereby slow down the troops' movements by creating a traffic snarl.

The report noted that the troops' movements coincided with Indian Army Chief V.K. Singh's January 16 filing of an affidavit in the Supreme Court challenging the government—an unprecedented act of defiance in itself. The affidavit contested the defense ministry's assertion that Singh was born in 1950, as indicated by its records, claiming

that Singh was in fact born in 1951 as claimed by the army bureaucracy. Singh ended up losing his appeal, meaning he will have to retire in May of this year rather than in 2013 as he wished.

The IE report triggered considerable commotion in government circles, but ultimately both the UPA government and the army joined forces to rubbish it.

Defense Minister A.K. Antony called the IE exclusive “totally baseless” and added: “There is nothing unusual in such movement of Army troops. The Army has explained this. We are confident about the patriotism of the Armed forces. [The] Indian armed forces will do nothing to undermine democracy.”

Army Chief V.K. Singh was even more strident in his denunciation of the article. Speaking to the *Hindu*, he termed the story the “fables of a sick mind” and termed the troop movements in question “routine exercises,” adding that the army is not obliged to notify the government of such routine actions.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called the report “alarmist” and declared that “nothing should be done to lower” the “dignity” of the Army Chief's “exalted office.”

The IE report is simply one of the more spectacular displays of growing tensions between the armed forces and the civilian government.

A key element in these tensions is the pivotal role that the military must play in the Indian bourgeoisie's quest for world power status, given the weakness of the country's economic base. Although the Indian elite boasts India is on the cusp of world power status, it remains by virtually all measures a poor and extremely backward country. With a population of 1.2 billion people, India has a GDP commensurate with that of Canada, a country with a population of less than 35 million. In 2010-11, India's per capita income was barely \$1,100.

In addition to arming itself with nuclear missiles, the Indian government has embarked on plans to develop a blue-water navy, asserted a major role in policing the Indian Ocean, and announced that it needs to be able to fight a two-

front war (i.e., a war against China and Pakistan simultaneously.) Following its failure to rapidly mobilize during a war crisis with Pakistan in 2001-2, the military developed a new “cold start” strategy, which reportedly will enable it to mount large-scale offensive military operations within hours, or at most days, of being ordered into the field.

The military has demanded ever greater funds from the meager public exchequer to accelerate the acquisition of sophisticated weapons systems. But because of the backwardness of Indian industry and technology, much of this weaponry has to be purchased from abroad.

This year the military budget was increased by 17 percent, reaching \$41 billion dollars. This comes on the top of sustained annual double-digit increases stretching back to the turn of the millennium.

While the sums allocated by the Indian elite to the military are meager in comparison with the Pentagon’s \$662 billion budget, India’s military spending is equivalent to 27 percent of all central government (\$153 billion) revenues and more than 15 percent of the entire state budget of \$263 billion.

According to the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, India has become the world’s largest importer of weapons, displacing China and accounting for fully 10 percent of global arms trade in the years 2007-11.

However, India’s military contends weapons acquisition has not happened fast enough because of corruption, bureaucratic delays in the procurement process, and insufficient funding.

Last month, in an interview with the *Hindu*, Army Chief V.K. Singh said he had been offered a Rs. 140 million (\$2.8 million) bribe by a former army officer turned lobbyist in 2010 to approve the acquisition of substandard trucks. The army chief did not reveal why it took two years for him to make this damning incident public, but he did say that he had reported the offer to the defence minister, thereby implying that the government is lax in rooting out corruption.

Also last month, a letter that V.K. Singh recently sent to the Prime Minister, bypassing the defence minister—the normal channel through which the high command speaks to the government—was leaked to sections of the press. The letter charged that the army lacks critical supplies and is woefully unprepared to fight a war. The army chief reportedly claimed that the tank fleet lacks ammunition, the country’s air defense is “97 percent obsolete,” the infantry “lacks night-fighting” capabilities, and elite forces are “woefully short of essential weapons.”

In response to the controversy generated by the army chief’s leaked letter and subsequent closed-door testimony from the vice chiefs of the air force and navy that reportedly called into question India’s capacity to fight a two-front

war, India’s Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence has summoned, for the first time ever, the heads of the country’s three armed services to appear before it to testify on the military’s state of preparedness.

Another source of friction between the armed forces, especially the army, and the civilian government is the major role that the military plays in suppressing internal dissent. According to an article published by the BBC, Ministry of Defence records show that until the mid-1990s the Indian Army was deployed “in aid of civil authority” on average every six days. There are no publicly available figures for the years since.

In recent years, the military has bitterly resisted any and all suggestions from political leaders that the laws giving it immunity from prosecution for illegal actions committed in the course of opposing secessionist insurgencies in Indian-held Kashmir and the north-east be amended or repealed. For decades, India’s political leaders have condoned innumerable atrocities including rape, abduction, torture and summary executions, but some establishment figures now argue the scale of the atrocities is a key factor fueling the insurgencies and undermines the legitimacy of the Indian state.

The army, for its part, successfully resisted pressure in 2009-10 from India’s Congress Party-led government to take a frontline role in Operation Green Hunt, the Indian state’s war against a Maoist-led tribal-based insurgency. Rather than engaging the Maoists themselves, the military had opted to play an ever more important role in training, providing logistical support, and determining the overall strategy of the paramilitary forces tasked with waging Operation Green Hunt.

The army clearly does not want to become too closely identified with a difficult and controversial counterinsurgency war, for fear that it will undermine popular support for the armed forces and the Indian elite’s ambitious plans to develop one of the world’s most powerful militaries.



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