



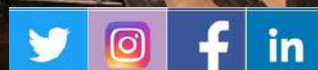
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FUTURE READY: PRIORITIES FOR INDIA'S ARMED FORCES IN AN AGE OF CONTESTED POWER

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ABOUT US

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**FUTURE READY: PRIORITIES FOR INDIA'S ARMED
FORCES IN AN AGE OF CONTESTED POWER**

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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Future Ready: Priorities for India's Armed Forces in an Age of Contested Power



Lt Gen AB Shivane, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) is a former Strike Corps Commander and Director General of Mechanised Forces.

Key Takeaways

- India faces a two-front reality, made more salient by the deep collusion between China and Pakistan and the emerging factor of Bangladesh, besides an omnipresent internal threat. Future readiness is a whole-of-nation task, not one for the services alone.
- War is becoming faster and more networked. Sensors, shooters, and decision makers must be joined in seconds, not hours, and the force that closes this loop first usually wins the exchange. AI has revolutionised the OODA loop.
- Jointness and theaterisation are the foundation for every other reform. Without a single, integrated chain of command, new weapons and technology will remain suboptimal for desired effects.

- Indigenous capability must move beyond assembling imported designs. The need is for an indigenous capability to design, develop, and manufacture its own weapons at wartime speed and for secure, assured internal supply chains.
- Cyber, space, Cognition, and the electromagnetic spectrum are now front-line domains. Their non-kinetic effects can disrupt an adversary even before the first kinetic action.
- AI should serve as a practical decision-support tool for the Indian Army, fusing data to accelerate decisions. Still, its effectiveness will ultimately depend on clean, secure and shared data, enabled by genuine jointness. Humans must remain on the loop.
- Doctrine, training, restructuring, and leadership determine whether new equipment is actually used effectively in battle. Technology without the right human foundation is an expensive parade piece.
- The last, perhaps most pressing, priority for all is a national security strategy that complements diplomacy, the economy, technology and defence in one document.

Key Words: AI-enabled decision superiority | Sensor fusion | Data-centric warfare | Faster OODA loop | Human-on-the-loop | Jointness | Secure common data | multi-domain integration | Targeting & logistics

The Readiness Imperative

Every generation of soldiers has believed it stood at the edge of a new kind of war. A careful study of a century and a half of such predictions found that most were wrong in detail, yet the instinct behind them was usually sound.¹ The character of war does change, and it tends to change fastest at the very moment when armies feel most settled in their old ways. The Indian defence forces stand at exactly such a moment today. The short, sharp exchange with Pakistan in Operation Sindoor, the drone-saturated trench lines of Ukraine, and the steady militarisation of space and cyberspace have together shown that machines, networks and algorithms now decide as much of a battle as soldiers do. The

question for India is not whether this change is coming. It has already arrived. The real question is whether the institutions that raise, train, and equip the force can keep pace.

This article sets out six priorities that the Indian defence forces should treat as non-negotiable over the next decade. These are not borrowed slogans from foreign doctrine. They come from India's geography, its adversaries, and its institutional history. Jointness and theaterisation form the foundation. Multi-domain and AI-enabled modernisation build on that foundation. Indigenous capabilities keep the force supplied through a long war. Command of space, cyber and the electromagnetic spectrum protects the invisible battlefield. Human capital and doctrine decide whether all this hardware is used well. A genuine national security strategy ties the whole effort to the nation's diplomatic, informational, military, and economic strength.

India's geostrategic location and geography present both strengths and challenges. It has a long and contentious border with China to the north and a shorter, less amicable border with Pakistan to the west. Over the past few decades, both neighbours have grown closer in military coordination, intelligence sharing and diplomatic stance. What was once treated as two separate fronts, planned for one at a time, now increasingly behaves like a single, connected front with two active ends. Any serious study of India's future readiness has to begin with this uncomfortable fact rather than argue around it.

Alongside these external fronts sits a quieter, more diffuse challenge inside India's own borders. Radical networks, narco-terror routes, cyber-enabled propaganda and periodic unrest in sensitive regions form what is often called the half front within. It rarely produces the drama of a border clash, yet it drains attention, manpower and trust in institutions over time. A future-ready force cannot treat this internal dimension as somebody else's problem. It has to be built into planning from the outset, alongside the two conventional fronts.

Readiness, then, is not a wish list of new equipment. It is a set of hard choices, made now, about where scarce money, manpower and attention should go first. The sections that follow examine the threats India actually faces, how warfare itself is changing, and the six priorities that follow.

Present Threats and Adversaries

China's military transformation from a large force to a networked, technology-enabled force with decision dominance, adaptation to information warfare, and precision warfare capabilities has been a defining feature of the past decade. Independent assessments of major-power military competition confirm that this shift is real and being seriously resourced, not merely announced for effect.²

Galwan in 2020 and Doklam in 2017 were skirmishes bounded by mutual restraint, which both sides observed until they chose not to, and by a shared, temporary interest in avoiding escalation beyond the tactical level. Treating the next contact on the Line of Actual Control as a repeat of that pattern means planning for the wrong war and falling into a tempting but dangerous trap. Drawing on China's accelerating dual-use infrastructure programme across the Tibetan Plateau, its deepening footholds in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, the demonstrated depth of China-Pakistan military collusion during the May 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, and an honest accounting of the internal constraints that continue to slow the People's Liberation Army even as it modernises needs more serious deliberation.

China's organisational reforms since 2015 have paralleled its infrastructure investment. The Second Artillery Force was reconstituted as the PLA Rocket Force in 2016 and has since added roughly a third as many missile brigades over three years, from 2017 to 2019, fielding the DF-41 road-mobile intercontinental system, the dual-use nuclear-conventional DF-26 intermediate-range missile, and the DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle. A newly established Information Support Force is intended to integrate space, cyber, and electronic warfare functions to support precision targeting, in line with doctrine. Though it has not yet demonstrated proficiency, this kind of networked kill chain could define future escalation dynamics. India's planners should read this reform not as evidence that China has already achieved seamless multi-domain integration, but as an indicator of where Beijing is placing its organisational and financial priorities, which itself is a leading indicator of how a future contingency is likely to be fought.

China's decade-long investment in dual-use rail, road and airfield infrastructure across the Tibetan Plateau has narrowed, and in several sectors closed, the reinforcement-speed advantage India held by default until the mid-2010s. Key infrastructure developments include the following.

Sector	Region	PLA Capability Accretion
Western Sector	Ladakh / Aksai Chin	• 76th Group Army rail access via Hotan-Golmud corridor • Depsang, Demchok, Pangong Tso dual bridge crossing • Shigatse J-20 / J-10 forward air deployment
Central Sector	Uttarakhand / Himachal Pradesh	• G219 Western Highway lateral access • Lower troop density; used as depth manoeuvre space • Limited xiaokang village density relative to flanks
Eastern Sector	Arunachal Pradesh / Sikkim	• 90 percent of xiaokang villages concentrated opposite this sector • G4218 expressway and Lhasa-Nyingchi rail extension

Pakistan presents a different but connected problem. Its regular armed forces have steadily rearmed since Operation Sindoor, drawing heavily on Chinese platforms, sensors, and munitions, and its air defence and precision-strike inventories have both deepened. Alongside this conventional rearmament sits Pakistan's long-standing proxy toolkit: militant groups nurtured across the border, periodic infiltration attempts, and a steady stream of propaganda and disinformation aimed at Indian audiences. The two strands, conventional and proxy, run concurrently and are intertwined to imbalance India and keep escalation below the conventional response threshold.

Operation Sindoor was not a war but a calibrated, short-duration stand-off engagement. It was a new strategy with a successful outcome for its limited aim and strategic messaging. It must be treated accordingly and not as a future template. Pakistan has drawn greater lessons, having been at the receiving end, and has moved to address its gaps. India's planning must do the same, or risk fighting the next crisis with assumptions the adversary has deliberately invalidated. Pakistan's post-Sindoor rearmament is qualitative rather than quantitative. It does not close India's aggregate advantage in platforms, munitions stocks, or economic depth. It does, however, purchase a narrow set of asymmetric tools, including stealth penetration, exo-atmospheric missile defence, and airborne early warning, timed specifically to complicate the opening hours of any future Indian strike package before the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft enters service.

The military capability boosts and implications post-operation Sindoor stated below cannot be overlooked.

Capability	Source	Status as of mid 2026	Operational implication for India
J 35 A or E stealth fighter	China	Initial agreement signed, limited	Forces diversion of Su thirty MKI fleet to detection roles,

Capability	Source	Status as of mid 2026	Operational implication for India
		deliveries expected 2026 to 2027	pressures AMCA timeline
KJ 500 AEW and C	China	Part of same package, timeline linked to fighter deliveries	Extends Pakistani detection range, degrades element of surprise for IAF strikes
HQ 19 exo atmospheric BMD	China	Reported agreement, induction sought before 2027	Complicates ballistic and hypersonic strike planning, raises first strike threshold
Hangor class submarines	China	First boat commissioned and delivered to Karachi, 2026	Extends threat to Indian maritime logistics and carrier task groups
J 10 C with PL 15	China	Deliveries largely complete by early 2026	Beyond visual range parity in some engagement envelopes
Expanded JF 17 production	China, Saudi financing	Under negotiation, tied to Gulf capital	Increases numerical depth of mid-tier fighter fleet

In the aftermath of the crisis, the China-Pakistan relationship has shifted from a standing-supplier relationship to something closer to an active combat proving ground, with Beijing deriving direct commercial and doctrinal benefits from Pakistan's willingness to field and, if necessary, expend Chinese platforms in a live confrontation with India. The growing proximity between Beijing and Islamabad only exacerbates the two issues. The two main rivals no longer plan independently, whether through joint military exercises, shared weapons platforms, or coordinated diplomatic stances on Kashmir. This does not necessarily mean a two-front war in the near future, but it could be a single front with collusion between the two nations, as in Operation Sindoor. However, India's force planning, basing, and logistics must assume the possibility of pressure on both fronts at once, rather than planning for one and hoping the other stays quiet or is managed.

A third, silent domain is at sea. The Indian Ocean Region hosts the vast majority of India's energy imports and exports, and extra-regional navies, undersea cable vulnerabilities, and piracy at strategic chokepoints are growing concerns. Above these three is a space dimension entailing reconnaissance satellites, navigation constellations, and early-warning systems, which has become critical for modern militaries to carry out precision, navigation, and targeting tasks, as well as communication and surveillance. Thus, it is an obvious target for an adversary who wants to "blind" India before the first shot is fired on land.

Taken together, these threats describe something closer to a two-and-a-half-front reality: a capable and modernising China in the north, a rearmed and coordinated Pakistan in the west, and a persistent internal and maritime dimension running beneath both. We must evaluate these pragmatically and wargame them across scenarios. Force postures, reserve mobilisation plans and pre-positioned stocks all need to be tested against this shorter timeline, not against the more comfortable assumptions of an earlier era.

On the Western Front, the lesson of Operation Sindoor deserves careful, honest study rather than triumphalism or alarm. The episode confirmed that India retains a credible and usable conventional deterrent and that political leadership was willing to authorise a measured strike in response to provocation. It also confirmed that Pakistan's air defence and early-warning networks had improved enough to complicate, though not prevent,

Indian operations, and that both sides exercised real caution about crossing thresholds that might invite a wider war. Future planning should draw a narrower, more useful lesson from this: escalation control tools, from clear communication channels to precise, proportionate strike options, are now as important to develop as raw firepower. On the diplomatic front, the 'Mecca Accord' adds another dimension.

The Changing Character of War

The war in Ukraine has offered the clearest live laboratory for how land warfare is changing. A detailed study of the fighting there shows that cheap, mass-produced drones, working alongside longer-range precision-strike systems, have become central to how forces find and destroy each other, often faster and more cheaply than traditional artillery duels ever did. This isn't just drones replacing tanks or artillery. It's the story of density and speed. The battlefield is infested with sensors, where virtually nothing goes undetected, and the window from detection to destruction shrinks from hours to minutes. The era of precision mass is also back, with drones and swarms playing a key role in contemporary warfare.

Artificial intelligence is further compressing the decision cycle. Analysts who have studied the military uses of AI closely argue that its real value lies less in dramatic autonomous weapons and more in the unglamorous work of fusing sensor data, cueing targets and shortening the chain between observation and action.³ One influential account of this shift describes it as a contest over the kill chain itself: the side that can sense, decide and strike fastest and can keep doing so under pressure gains a durable advantage even against a materially stronger opponent.⁴ A separate body of work on autonomous weapons cautions that this speed comes with real risks, since compressing human judgement out of the loop can also compress the space available to avoid mistakes and unintended escalation.⁵

A recent essay on what its author calls 'celerity warfare' captures this shift in plain terms: future conflict will reward the side that can complete its own observe, orient, decide and act loop before the adversary completes theirs, across every domain at once.⁶ This is a useful way to think about India's own position. India does not need to match China's or

Pakistan's platform. It needs to close its own decision loop faster than either adversary can close theirs, and it needs to do so consistently, not only in a single favourable engagement. The need for force development is a capability-cum-opportunity-based approach rather than a legacy and reactive-threat-cum-capability approach.

None of this renders older forms of combat power irrelevant. Tanks, artillery, and infantry still hold ground, and holding ground still matters, as the static front lines of the war in Ukraine demonstrate. What has changed is the environment in which those older systems operate. A tank that cannot withstand persistent drone surveillance and an infantry unit that cannot communicate securely under jamming will struggle, no matter how well designed they are on paper. Future readiness is not about making an "either/or" choice between old and new ways of engaging combat power and new ways of sensing, networking, and protection, but about marrying them together and adapting for the future.

The line between civil and military has blurred. Wars have no fixed geography or geometry and thus require a whole-of-nation approach. Dual-use technologies in space, AI, drones, and data and information warfare are converging. Cognitive warfare is emerging as a critical domain where narratives will define victory. Shaping the narrative around a conflict, both domestically and internationally, has thus become an ongoing task that begins well before the first shot and continues well after the last.

Priority One: Complete the Journey to Jointness and Theaterisation

Every other reform discussed in this article depends on getting this one right first. India created the office of Chief of Defence Staff and a Department of Military Affairs in 2019 and 2020, a genuine milestone after two decades of deliberation. Scholarly assessment of this reform, however, finds that institutionalising jointness in the Indian military remains an uneven and contested process, with real differences of view among the services on how far integration should go and how quickly it should proceed.⁷ Structural change on paper is not the same as a joint fighting culture in practice, and India still has a long way to go on the latter.

The case for Integrated Theatre Commands has been a work in progress for over two decades. The war on the Northern and Western Fronts now spans land, air, sea, cyber, space, and cognitive domains as an integrated multidomain operation. A force still split among seventeen single-service commands cannot fight in silos in the modern battlespace to achieve favourable outcomes. Independent analysts who have studied the reform reach the same view. Organising around geography and function, not service identity, now sits at the centre of India's national security architecture, even if they still argue over how many theatres there should be and where they should sit.

Priorities and the transition still need work, though. Three things deserve more emphasis on the road to theatre commands: closing operational capability gaps within each service, establishing functional commands for space and cyber before the transition begins, and managing the changeover so no vulnerability or imbalance opens along the way.⁸

As recently as mid-2026, voices within India's strategic community have been arguing that military reform should prioritise integrated capabilities over individual service acquisitions and a system-centric kill web architecture over a platform-centric approach. Their logic is that equipment bought for three separate services will underperform if no single theatre commander can employ it.⁹ That logic is sound. Adding more precision munitions, drones or satellites before fixing command and control only adds more systems that will not talk to each other when a crisis hits.

Command and control must evolve at the same pace as the character of war and the battlespace evolve. Work on digitally revolutionised battlespace command argues that a theatre commander in a compressed, multi-domain fight needs a single, secure, real-time picture of land, air, maritime, cyber and space activity, rather than separate service feeds stitched together under time pressure.¹⁰ Building this shared picture is as much a jointness problem as it is a technology problem. It requires common standards, shared training, and officers from each service who trust the information coming from the other two.

Three practical steps would advance this priority without reopening every old inter-service argument. First, the three still-unresolved theatre boundaries, one facing China, one

facing Pakistan, and a maritime theatre for the Indian Ocean Region, should be finalised on a fixed timeline rather than left open-ended. Second, joint professional military education should be a genuine requirement for command at the one-star level and above, not an optional career enhancement. Third, a single joint logistics and sustainment command should be raised ahead of full theatreisation, since shared fuel, ammunition and transport are usually where jointness either succeeds quietly or fails visibly.

Priority Two: Modernise for Multi-Domain and AI-Enabled Combat

The RAND Corporation's broad assessment of how warfare is likely to look by 2030 highlights a shift toward more contested, more transparent battlefields, in which hiding large formations becomes progressively harder and striking them precisely becomes progressively easier.¹¹ India's modernisation programme must be judged against this reality rather than the comfortable assumption that mass alone will carry the day. A large but slow-moving, poorly networked force risks being seen and struck long before it can bring its numbers to bear.

Unmanned aerial systems and robotics deserve particular attention, precisely because the experience in Ukraine shows both their promise and their limits. A detailed technical study of UAV employment concludes that land forces gain the most value not from any single wonder drone but from a full complex: cheap reconnaissance drones to find targets, kamikaze munitions to strike them, and a resilient communications backbone that keeps working even when the enemy is jamming it.¹² India's own drone programmes, spread across the services, the Defence Research and Development Organisation and a growing private sector, need to converge around this complex rather than around isolated, one-off platforms bought for demonstration purposes.

Counter-drone capability is as important as offensive drone capability, yet it has received noticeably less attention. Every forward air defence position, armoured column and logistics node along both fronts should assume it will be targeted by cheap, mass-produced drones from the opening hours of any future conflict. Layered, autonomous counter-drone systems with radar, electronic jamming and short-range interceptors must be an integral part of a unit's War Establishment inventory.

An AI application for decision dominance with a man in the loop must gain greater traction. It must fuse sensor data, identify anomalies, and reduce the legacy, tedious work currently obstructing the staff process behind targeting and logistics decisions.¹³ But AI will deliver results only when built on clean, common, and secure data shared across formations and services. Technology cannot compensate for organisational silos. It will amplify the advantage of genuine jointness. Humans, not machines, must retain control. As we transition from 'Man-in-the-Loop' to 'Man-on-the-Loop', we must be conscious of the threat of 'Man-out-of-the-Loop' in an AI versus AI environment.

Priority Three: Deepen Indigenous Capabilities into Design Leadership

India's Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India drive in defence have delivered tangible gains over the past decade. The defence ecosystem and industrial base have begun to evolve and perform better, driven by the rise of the defence private sector and young startups. The country has moved from being the world's largest arms importer towards a growing domestic production base and rising exports. A review of the earlier challenging period showed that domestic output lagged, despite successive procurement and licensing reforms. These two initiatives have become real drivers of self-reliance, not just slogans, though much more is needed to reach the rightful destination of technology sovereignty.¹⁴ That progress deserves credit. Yet, it should not be mistaken for the finish line.

The difference that matters most now is between assembling foreign designs under licence and owning the design process. India can build many systems today because a foreign partner has handed over drawings and components. But it cannot always modify them quickly under wartime pressure, because the design knowledge and the reasoning behind each engineering choice often still reside abroad. A long war, which India's own force planning has to treat as possible, will demand rapid battlefield modification and repair. That is only possible where India controls the design itself, not just the assembly line.¹⁵

Three shifts would move indigenous capability beyond import substitution toward real design leadership. First, more of the annual defence R&D budget should go directly to

private firms and academic laboratories working on specific, unglamorous subsystems such as seekers, batteries, chips, LLMs, and quantum communication, rather than being concentrated in a handful of large flagship platforms. Second, the armed forces should treat their own maintenance and repair depots as a source of design feedback. Technicians who repair equipment in field conditions know best where a design is fragile. Third, export policy should be used deliberately to build scale. An industry that produces only for the Indian armed forces will always struggle to justify the investment that genuine design innovation demands.

None of this argues against working with foreign partners. Co-development and technology transfer remain useful, and in some areas like jet engines and certain sensor technologies to fill the near-term void, they are unavoidable for now. The point is narrower. Judge every major cooperation agreement by how much design knowledge it transfers, not only by how many units it delivers. A big order of imported equipment that leaves India no wiser about how the kit works is a short-term fix, and it does not build future readiness.

Priority Four: Command the Space, Cyber and Electromagnetic Domains

Space, cyber and the electromagnetic spectrum share one feature that sets them apart from land, air and sea: an adversary can attack India there without a single soldier crossing a border, and the effects can be felt within seconds. India's 2019 anti-satellite test demonstrated a capability, but capability demonstrated once in peacetime is not the same as resilience sustained through a war. Satellite constellations, ground stations, and the terrestrial networks that connect them all need redundancy built in from the design stage so that the loss of any single node does not degrade performance but rather causes the system to collapse.

India's vulnerability in the cyber domain has been flagged by its own strategic community for well over a decade. An early and still relevant warning argued that India's cyber defences lagged badly behind the scale of the threat it faced, leaving critical infrastructure exposed to disruption from both state and non-state actors.¹⁶ Much has improved since that warning was written, including the creation of dedicated cyber commands within each service and a national Computer Emergency Response Team with growing technical

capacity. The underlying problem it identified, however, persists: cyber defence in India remains organised mainly around individual departments and services, rather than around a single national military cyber command with the authority and the resources to act at the speed a real crisis would demand.

The same seriousness should be accorded to the electromagnetic spectrum. Specific frequency bands are vital for modern precision weapons, secure communications, and drone operations, and an enemy that can jam or spoof these bands at low cost gains an unfair advantage. India's electronic warfare units need to be treated as a frontline combat arm in their own right, integrated into every theatre exercise, rather than as a specialist support function called upon only when convenient.

Priority Five: Build the Human and Doctrinal Foundation

No amount of new equipment compensates for gaps in training, doctrine, or leadership, and this priority is easy to neglect precisely because its payoff is slower and less visible than that of a new weapons platform. India's officer training establishments have begun introducing multi-domain and technology content into their curricula, but this content still sits alongside, rather than fully inside, traditional single-service training. A young officer commissioned today will spend a career fighting alongside drones, satellites and cyber effects that barely featured in the syllabus that trained their instructors.

Doctrine has to be rewritten with the same seriousness as equipment is procured. A doctrine document that describes how drones, precision fires, and electronic warfare should work together in theory is only useful if units actually train against it under realistic conditions, including when their own communications are jammed and their own satellites are unreliable. Exercises that assume perfect communications and perfect situational awareness teach the wrong lessons, because no future adversary will grant India either luxury.

The idea of a citizen-soldier continuum, linking the regular forces to a wider pool of trained reserves, technically skilled civilians and territorial units, deserves renewed attention here. A short, intense war of the kind India's geography makes plausible will consume

trained manpower and specialist skills, particularly in cyber, drone operations and logistics, faster than peacetime recruitment can replace them. Building and periodically training such a reserve now costs relatively little. Creating one after a conflict has already begun would cost a great deal.

Leadership development matters as much as any of this. Officers who will command joint, multi-domain forces need repeated exposure to the other services long before they reach senior rank, not a single joint appointment inserted late in a career built almost entirely within one service. Broader assessments of India's strategic environment argue that the country's security challenges have become genuinely cross-cutting, spanning military, economic, and technological dimensions at once, which places a premium on officers comfortable operating across these boundaries rather than only within their own specialism.¹⁷

Welfare and retention deserve a place in this discussion, even though they rarely feature in technical writing about future warfare. A force that struggles to retain trained pilots, cyber specialists and drone operators against better-paid private sector opportunities will find every other priority in this article harder to sustain. Career structures, pay parity for technical trades, and post-service opportunities all need review with the same urgency usually reserved for equipment budgets, since skilled people, not just skilled machines, are what future readiness ultimately depends on.

Priority Six: Anchor Defence Within a National Security Strategy

India does not have a formal, published national security strategy that integrates the country's diplomatic, economic, technological, and military actions so they work in concert. Individual parts of this puzzle exist and are sometimes managed informally. What is missing is the document and, more importantly, the process behind it that forces different ministries and services to reconcile their priorities against a shared assessment of the threats described earlier in this article. Such a document also has deterrence value by setting red lines and capabilities.

This gap has real, practical costs. Export controls on sensitive technologies, trade policy toward key partners, foreign investment screening, and defence procurement are currently coordinated informally, case by case, rather than through a standing mechanism designed for this purpose. A future-ready defence posture requires economic and technological policy to align with military policy, particularly on issues such as semiconductor supply chains, access to critical minerals, and control over key digital infrastructure, all of which now have direct military consequences.

A genuine national security strategy would also make the six priorities discussed in this article easier to sequence and fund. Jointness, modernisation, indigenisation, the space and cyber domains, human capital and strategy itself compete for the same limited budget every year. Without an agreed national framework setting out which of these should be funded first, the loudest voice in any given budget cycle, rather than the most urgent need, tends to win. A published strategy, reviewed and updated on a fixed cycle, would give planners in the Ministry of Defence, the services and allied ministries a common reference point that currently does not exist.

A final point on sequencing is worth stating plainly, since it is easily lost in a list of six priorities that all sound equally urgent. The priority must be to optimise capabilities, moving from interoperability to interdependence. A hardened satellite architecture or a drone feed that reports to three separate service headquarters, rather than to a single space agency with real authority, will still leave gaps at the seams. Sequencing, in other words, is not a minor implementation detail. It is itself a strategic choice, and getting it wrong will cost India time it may not have.

A Framework for Sequencing These Priorities

The six priorities set out above are not equally urgent, and treating them as a single undifferentiated list would waste scarce time and money. The table below offers a rough sequencing across near-, medium-, and long-term horizons, together with the institution best placed to lead each effort. It is offered as a starting point for planning, not as a finished blueprint, since the exact pace will depend on the resources actually made available in each budget cycle.

Priority	Near Term (1-2 years)	Medium Term (3-5 years)	Lead Institution
Jointness and theaterisation	Finalise functional commands followed by joint theatre commands. Pay attention to transition management.	Joint professional military education mandatory for command	Department of Military Affairs
Multi-domain and AI modernisation	Fielded counter-drone systems at unit level	AI-enabled sensor fusion across services	Services and DRDO
Indigenous capabilities and design leadership	R&D funding shifted toward subsystems	Domestic design authority for key platforms and technologies	DRDO and private industry
Space, cyber and spectrum	Unified military cyber command and Space Command	Redundant, hardened satellite architecture. Offensive space capability.	Defence Space and Cyber Agencies
Human capital and doctrine	Multi-domain content in officer training	Trained citizen-soldier reserve at scale	Training Commands
National security strategy	A national security strategy document be published	Standing interagency review cycle	National Security Council Secretariat

It is also worth setting India's own response posture directly against the specific adversary trends described earlier in this article, since a sequencing plan is only useful if it targets the right adversary. The table below places China, Pakistan and the internal half-front side by side with the capability trend each presents and the priority response it demands.

Front	Dominant Capability Trend	Priority Response
China (northern front)	Informatised, increasingly automated forces; improved high-altitude logistics	Multi-domain modernisation; theatre-level command and control
Pakistan (Western Front)	Conventional rearmament combined with proxy and disinformation toolkit	Jointness; counter-drone and electronic warfare depth
Internal half front	Radicalisation, cyber-enabled propaganda, periodic unrest	Citizen-soldier continuum; National Citizens Security Culture, cyber and information resilience

Conclusion

The history of military prediction offers one consistent lesson: the details of the next war are seldom guessed correctly, but the broad direction of change usually can be discerned.¹⁸ India's direction is now reasonably clear. War is becoming more networked and more contested across domains that did not exist as battlefields a generation ago. India's adversaries are investing heavily in exactly this kind of warfare, and they are increasingly coordinating with each other.

The six priorities set out in this article, jointness and theaterisation, multi-domain and AI-enabled modernisation, indigenisation as design leadership, command of space and cyber and the spectrum, human capital and doctrine, and an overarching national security

strategy, are not separate projects competing for attention. They are one project, viewed from six angles. Progress on any single priority without progress on the others will produce a lopsided force: well-equipped but poorly commanded, technologically advanced but doctrinally unprepared, or strategically clear-eyed but organisationally unable to act.

Readiness, in the end, is not a state that India will one day reach and then maintain. It is a continuous act of adjustment, made under the pressure of a changing threat and a changing technology base, with resources that will always feel insufficient against the scale of the task. The armed forces that manage this adjustment fastest, not the ones that manage it perfectly, will be the ones that shape the outcome of the next conflict rather than respond to it.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

ENDNOTES

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