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Some thoughts on the defence budget

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On June 7, the finance minister had put up for approval in the Parliament a revised budget of the current financial year (FY) of 2011-12 and a proposed budget for the next FY i.e. 2012-13. With the possible absence of the opposition parties from the Parliament, the budget session is going to be one of tedious repetitive accolade for the government from the treasury bench members, each ending the speech with a list of demands from the MPs' constituencies for roads, bridges, schools and hospitals.

Defence, although a major expenditure head of the government, will remain outside the purview of the parliamentary debate, to be "guillotined" on June 30. Traditionally, the finance minister in his budget speech explains in detail what the government achieved over the past years and what it wishes to achieve in future, while having only a cursory paragraph on defence. This time, however, for the first time, the minister outlined a shopping list of defence equipment that the government wishes to procure for the forces. This is a welcome departure from the past. However, I do not foresee any serious debate in the Parliament on defence policy, expenditures or on procurement priorities. Although defence accounts for 6-7% of the government expenditure, and is the second largest expenditure head of the government, it remains outside any critical examination. Despite three decades of democratic polity, much of defence affairs remain hushed in a cloak of official secrecy.

While everyone agrees to the need for a military force, there is little unanimity on what should be its size and shape and how much resources should be spent for its upkeep. Whether the money spent for the military is a drain on the economy or the money could be better spent for national development has been an age-old debate. Gun-versus-butter debate rages in every country, especially where free speech and democratic rights are enshrined. Thus, a delicate balance between military expenditure and development expenses is what is needed.

While one can argue that the money spent for buying tanks, submarines or fighter aircraft could be better spent in building schools, hospitals or roads and bridges, one could also argue that what use those would be if there is no peace or if the country is overrun by an aggressor.

In a country such as ours, military is an important source of trained manpower -- from drivers to technicians, from pilots to aircraft engineers from rescue divers to ships' captains. The leadership and academic training that military imparts prepares one to shoulder responsibilities far removed from his/her specialisation. No wonder, we see ex-military personnel actively contributing in every sphere of our national life.

Bangladesh military has traditionally been allocated between 1.3 to 1.5% of GDP over the last decade. Despite a steady percentage of resources going to the military, the net amount spent has more than trebled in 12 years, from about Tk. 3,000 crore in 2001-02 to over Tk. 12,686 crore in the FY 2012-13, representing 6.6% of the total government expenditure. Thanks to a steady rise of our GDP, we are able to spend more every year. This year for example, we spent about \$1.5 billion for defence, which is 1.5% of our GDP.

Critics will, however, question the rationale behind spending even this amount at a time when we remain one of the poorest countries of the world. Our per capita income is half of India's and 1/3rd of Sri Lanka's. Our investment in education and health, two key social sectors, remain below other Saarc countries. Despite a fall in the percentage of people below the poverty line, the number of absolute poor people in Bangladesh is staggering. While realists will point out that our defence expenditures as a percentage of GDP remains the lowest in the Saarc region, critics will point out that unlike India and Pakistan, who have a raging dispute over Kashmir, and India's disputed border with China, Bangladesh's land border with its neighbours, India and Myanmar, is demarcated and well-defined. Our exclusive economic zone (EEZ) with Myanmar and India were disputed, but all parties decided to refer the dispute to arbitration court. Recent arbitration and mutual acceptance of the judgment on EEZ by both Myanmar and Bangladesh has set a tone where EEZ boundary with India could also be demarcated to the mutual satisfaction of both parties.

We do have unresolved border issues with India such as enclaves and adverse possessed land, but those can only be resolved across the negotiating table. Our most serious security issue with India is regarding sharing of waters of common rivers. This issue too has no military solution. Having said that there is no imminent and clear external military threat to Bangladesh, there are a number of internal, regional and international security threats that would require a robust military posture for the country.

Bangladesh's geo-strategic location is such that it acts as a land link to the countries of South East Asia with the rest of South Asia. Its strategic importance has further enhanced due to the emergence of two Asian giants, China and India, who are our close neighbours. In fact, Bangladesh is positioned as a natural conduit for trade, commerce and communication between these two big powers.

Although growing economic relations between India and China has pushed their border dispute into the background, the future of their relationship remains uncertain. In case Indo-China relations become strained, it would compel Bangladesh to keep tight-rope walking between the two rivals. Growing Chinese interest in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean is viewed with concern by India and the US, as well as littoral countries such as Malaysia, Singapore or Indonesia. Myanmar's possible transition to democracy and its warming up with India and the West will worry the Chinese regime.

We cannot remain a silent bystander to these momentous changes happening at our doorstep. While we firmly strive to maintain a peaceful neighbourhood, we must be able to defend peace, if required. A robust military capability is, therefore, necessary. Along with geostrategic necessity, we have a number of simmering and active insurgencies in our neighbourhood, which

in the past have often spilled over to Bangladesh. Taking advantage of our poor state of governance, foreign insurgents have used Bangladeshi territory as a sanctuary or a conduit for illegal arms transshipment. We cannot allow these things to happen again.

Bangladesh, along with India and Pakistan, had been afflicted with Islamic extremist activities. Strong police action has been able to suppress these extremist networks in the country, but we need to remain vigilant. Similarly, the so-called Maoist guerilla movement in Nepal and much of Northern and Central India has a spillover effect on Bangladesh. All these development might call for military response in future. It is important, therefore, to develop a military force that can effectively meet any threat at present and in future.

It, therefore, follows that we make the most effective use of defence resources. Although the nitty-gritty of defence preparedness and force structuring is a purely military affair, its broad strategy, aim and objective need to be participatory, in which people must have a say. There is also a need for civilian supervision, such as Parliamentary oversight and greater access to media, to ensure that the resources are not ill-spent or pilfered due to corruption or inefficiency. Military purchases everywhere breed corruption because of the cloak of secrecy and lack of transparency involved in the whole process. The rather long military shopping list that the finance minister unveiled in his budget speech will surely demand careful monitoring and external financial scrutiny.

The writer is a retired Air Commodore.