



India Cancels New Battalions for Mountain Strike Corps

OE Watch Commentary: The government of India's efforts to counter the Chinese military presence and road construction near the Indian-Chinese border took a new turn when the Indian Ministry of Defense (MoD) recently announced that it canceled the formation of new battalions as part of a "Mountain Strike Corps," which had been established in response to Chinese activities over the past several years. While some in India and across the region immediately saw this as a sign of the Indian government continuing to reconcile with the Chinese government and/or an unwillingness to counter the threat from China, the accompanying excerpted article examines the reasons for the cancellation and the outlook for the unit.

The article comes from *The Wire*, an independent English-language news website in India, and the author of it notes how anonymous sources in the government believed the "decision to raise the MSC was a result of institutional factors rather than strategic necessity" and that "the army officer corps saw the MSC as a way of accessing a greater slice of the defence budget." The author also brings up how the previous administration (the UPA Party under former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh) "very reluctantly and rather late in its tenure...had sanctioned the corps." While the change of administrations in India likely led to the cancellation of new battalions, the author also mentions how the MoD is looking at how "manpower for the completion of the MSC can be created from within existing resources rather than by an increase in recruitment." He believes that the "MSC is not quite shelved" and cites equipment that has already been acquired, including "145 ultra-light howitzers cleared for purchase" back in 2016. It is important to note that the recent announcement was for canceling new battalions, but a couple of them have already been established in addition to the howitzers already acquired. Domestic political considerations aside, if the Indian government later decides to revive the MSC, it appears there are already elements in place to build around. **End OE Watch Commentary (Stein)**

“While the two defensive divisions that were formed in 2009-10 enabled defensive deterrence or deterrence by denial, an offensive corps would provide the punch for deterrence by punishment.”

Source: Ali Ahmed, "Decoding the Logic Behind the Shelving of India's Mountain Strike Corps," *The Wire*, 22 July 2018. <https://thewire.in/security/decoding-the-logic-behind-the-shelving-of-indias-mountain-strike-corps>

The media has reported that the Indian army's much vaunted mountain strike corps (MSC) has been put in cold storage. An insinuation attributed by the media to unnamed sources has it that the decision to raise the MSC was a result of institutional factors rather than strategic necessity.

According to these sources, the army officer corps saw the MSC as a way of accessing a greater slice of the defence budget. By blaming the army for inflating the threat perception in order to make itself the primus inter pares among the three services suggests, however, that the sources are set on diverting attention away from the implications of the decision for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government...

The government, well past its honeymoon period, has been coming in for criticism lately. Its actions following the prime minister's end-April dash to Wuhan for an 'informal summit' with Xi Jinping...Further, the government downsized the defence budget to its lowest proportion this year in terms of gross domestic product since 1962. Mindful of the unforeseeable consequences of a diplomatic or military crisis in an election year, the government apparently has developed cold feet on its policy of standing up to China. It therefore needed to send a signal to Beijing that it is drawing its claws back.

...The MSC had been cleared by the previous UPA government very reluctantly and rather late in its tenure, when, in its second avatar, too weak to fend off the army's pitch for the MSC any longer, it had sanctioned the corps. The May 2013 Chinese intrusion in the Depsang sector perhaps forced the government's hand...

The Modi government took a view of the new raising early in its tenure...While on the one hand the BJP-led government wanted to project a tough-on-security image, the prime minister had indicated at the combined commanders' conference that the army should turn to technology rather than compensating for capacity voids with manpower, as it was wont to do. The decision came despite the Chinese intrusion early in the Modi tenure in the Chumar sector...

Immediately prior to the 73-day stand-off with the Chinese at Doklam last year, the second division of the MSC was reportedly under raising at Pathankot. The army had to dig into its war reserve stocks to equip it, thereby depleting those stocks as the defence public service utilities and ordnance factories could not keep pace...

It appears that the government has finally taken a call and clamped down on further new raisings, affecting the corps gaining its full complement. Hopes are now pinned on the study underway by the army training command on 'optimisation', whereby manpower for the completion of the MSC can be created from within existing resources rather than by an increase in recruitment...

In other words, the MSC is not quite shelved. It can be completed without expanding the size of the army. In any case, the completion date had been projected at 2021...Weapons acquisition has been underway for some two years now, with the 145 ultra-light howitzers cleared for purchase at the cost of \$750 million under the fast track foreign military sales route in June 2016...

In what is now an election year, Modi knows he needs to focus on the domestic and can do without the distraction of a border crisis, especially with a superior foe. He does not need China in the political strategy underway of internal polarisation as he approaches the 2019 elections...

The army had advanced a strategic rationale for the MSC, arguing that India faced a 'two front' threat. While India had the offensive capability to tame its western neighbour, the army argued that it required a similar capability for tackling its neighbour to the north. The army wished to move from dissuasion to deterrence. While the two defensive divisions that were formed in 2009-10 enabled defensive deterrence or deterrence by denial, an offensive corps would provide the punch for deterrence by punishment...