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# Naravane as Modi's New Army Chief

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# **Naravane as Modi's New Army Chief**

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India's Chief of Army Staff designate Lt Gen Manoj Mukund Naravane will assume command of the Indian Army on December 31, 2019. He would succeed Gen. Bipin Rawat as the top commander of the 1.3 million strong force, which is also the world's second largest army.

His tenure would be nearly two years and four months ending in April 2022. Prior to his elevation, he was serving as the Vice Chief of Army Staff – a position he had assumed few months earlier.

Gen Narvane has in the past also commanded the Eastern Command of the Indian Army, which is responsible for a wide area including Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh in the North, Nagaland Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura and Meghalaya in the North-East and Assam and Bengal. Moreover, he has commanded the Ambala based II Strike corps. One of the distinguishing features of his 37 yearlong military career is his counter-insurgency stints in the North-East of India and Occupied Jammu and Kashmir because of which he is seen within the Army as a counter-insurgency specialist. He is also known for his expertise on China.

He was commissioned into the 7th battalion, the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment in June 1980. Gen Narvane was the senior most commander in Indian Army at the time of being designated as the successor to Gen Rawat. His seniority was, however, no guarantee of an automatic elevation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had in the past ignored seniority while picking his armed forces commanders. His predecessor Gen Rawat for instance had superseded two senior generals, when he was appointed as the army chief in 2016. He (Rawat) was then preferred over them because of his counter-insurgency experience. It is, therefore, believed that Gen Narvane's counter-insurgency and China experiences were the most important considerations while picking him for the top military job.

The backdrop against which this change of command in the Indian Army is taking place is very significant, not only because of the uprising in Occupied Kashmir and long running insurgency in north-eastern areas of Nagaland, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, but also due to the modernization of the Army and a significant shift in Delhi's approach to country's defense and national security. Indian strategy now has greater elements of assertiveness and risk-taking in use of force as depicted by the events during Balakot stand-off, escalation on the Line of Control, annexation of Kashmir, and rising Hindu nationalism. Moreover, a fusion of defense matters and domestic politics is also apparent.

It is, therefore, important to assess BJP government's decision to pick Gen Narvane against this setting to assess its implications for regional security and Pakistan in particular.

India, it should be recalled, has since Nehru days religiously preserved civilian control of the military. The Army has, meanwhile, maintained considerable autonomy on its operational matters. However, lately the influence of Indian Army on government's national security policy is growing especially in the wake of alignment of BJP government's political objectives with the military goals.

The predominant opinion among the military observers is that the new army chief would have very limited space to maneuver. The powers of the army chief may get diluted if the government moves ahead with its plan to appoint a chief of defense staff, who would be the head of the tri-services. Since the outgoing Army Chief Gen Rawat is a frontrunner for that position, it is believed that in a situation in which he gets that appointment, his influence on the Army may continue even after leaving the army chief's office.

Irrespective of whether or not Gen Rawat is elevated as CDS, the organizational and operational reforms within the army are likely to continue and so would the two front war thinking, the Cold Start Doctrine, the 'IBGisation' (Integrated Battle Groups) of the army, and the creation of theatre commands.

A major challenge for the new Indian army chief with regards to continuation of the reforms and modernization of the forces would be the budgetary constraints that have been aggravated by India's slowing economy. In his capacity as the vice chief of army staff, he was already looking after issues related to procurement and planning. Therefore, he would be adequately prepared with regards to prioritizing the modernization plans in view of the budgetary situation.

Gen Narvane is, meanwhile, likely to maintain his predecessor's aggressive posture on Pakistan. He would in great likelihood carry on exploring the possibility of hostilities against Pakistan under the nuclear threshold. At a seminar in August 2019, he had said: "Pakistan could keep raising the nuclear bogey but we are not scared." He made those remarks in the context of Prime Minister Imran Khan's warning that Pakistan and India were nuclear powers and a war between them could have grave consequences not only for the region, but the world at large. He had then further said that "We are ready to face any challenges. Whatever we do, it is done keeping in mind long-term goal."

Since Gen Narvane has in the recent past (Jan 2016 – Jan 2017) served Ambala-based II Strike Corps, also known as Kharga Corps, which possesses more than 50% of the Indian army's offensive capabilities and has the mandate to launch offensive strike against Pakistan in the eventuality of a war, he would be current on operational matters related to Pakistan.

The other major issue that is likely to be high on Gen Narvane's agenda is China. India and China are engaged in a strategic competition. The new army chief might play a significant role in pursuing the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to counter Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean thus creating more troubles for Pakistan.

Since 2014, New Delhi's policy vis-à-vis Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the insurgency in the North-East has been an excessive reliance on use of force. The other important development that took place during this time was that, unlike past, there was no accompanying political strategy for dealing with uprisings. This shift away from seeking political solutions and not re-evaluating the use of force continues to define India's counter-insurgency operations.

Elevation of Gen Narvane, on the basis of his involvement in the implementation of strategy that BJP government has been pursuing since its first tenure, is a clear indication of the continuation of that tough approach. As mentioned above Prime Minister Modi had earlier picked Gen Rawat in Dec 2016 for the same reason.

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