

Managing Civil-Military Relations : How to Bridge the Gap*

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Introduction

In a modern Westphalian state, sovereignty is preserved by the Armed Forces as per directions provided by the political class based on supremacy of the elected government. Military would always remain an instrument of executing the political will of the nation which is expressed by elected representatives and formulated by bureaucrats. Grand Strategy of a nation which is sum total of its economic, diplomatic, military prowess and ideology, would always dictate the basic framework upon which military strategy is formulated. The execution of the military strategy to unleash it to its maximum potential, thereby contributing effectively to Comprehensive National Power, would always be dependent upon the close coordination between civil component of decision making represented by politicians and bureaucrats and professionalism of military personnel. Hence, civil - military relations form an integral and most crucial component of national security policy. This implies need for firm and unambiguous political control of the military. However, a relationship based on trust and respect between them would result in a polity that is alive to the issues of national security and a participative military. The nations which fail to develop such a balance run the risk of jeopardising national security, resource mismanagement and discontented military. The current state of civil-military relationship in India is mired in a flux originating from lack of this critical balance.

Aim

The aim of this paper is to carry out an analysis of the present state of civil-military relations through historical and theoretical perspective, identify the impediments and suggest a way ahead.

*This is a slightly edited text of the essay which won the First Prize in USI Gold Medal Essay Competition 2016 in Group A.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLVI, No. 606, October-December 2016.

Scope

It is proposed to cover the topic under the following heads:-

- (a) Historical perspective of the civil-military relationship in India.
- (b) Theoretical construct of the civil-military relations.
- (c) Identify the impediments.
- (d) Recommendations and suggest a way ahead.
- (e) Conclusion.

Historical Perspective

Post-independence, many incidents and decisions suggested the constant state of tension in the civil-military relationship. There were always undercurrents of disharmony between the bureaucracy and the military with the political leaders either ignorant or even at times, encouraging the bureaucracy to keep the military marginalised. The ill-informed and apprehensive political class usually found it more convenient to keep the military at bay. The Armed Forces have often expressed their displeasure over such state of affairs but have been unable to bring about a change so far. The civil-military relationship has been marred by turf protection, prejudices and mistrust.

Many committees have been constituted for the purpose of defence reforms. They stretch from the time when Jawaharlal Nehru tasked Patrick Blackett, a British Military Consultant, 'to Indianise the military', to the most recent Ravindra Gupta Task Force focussed on indigenisation. The intervening period has been filled by Maj Gen Himmatsinhji Report, HM Patel Report, Kargil Review Committee Report, Naresh Chandra Committee Report, et al. Most of these committees allude to the lack of defence preparedness and military effectiveness. Significantly, all these emphasised the need for modernisation, better coordination as well as integration of the civilian and military components of the national security apparatus. The main underlying theme of the suggested reforms has always been mutual trust and respect. Without moving forward on this front, implementing other reforms would prove to be a non-starter.

Theoretical Construct

Samuel Huntington. The theoretical framework for analysing civil-military relations is based on works of scholars like Samuel Huntington, Morris Janowitz, Amos Perlmutter, Peter Feaver et al. Samuel Huntington's pioneering work, 'The Soldier and the State', laid the foundation of civil-military relations theory. His theory, aimed at determining relationship between the military and the government, classified two styles of civilian control over military viz. Objective Control and Subjective Control. In Objective Control, Huntington argued that military becoming more professional in their sphere of activities, would reduce the likelihood of military trying to exercise control over the civilian government. The idea of Subjective Control is defined as anything that would increase the link between the military and civilian government involving military participation in politics.¹ The Subjective Control approach would attempt at civilianising the military as against Objective Control which would attempt at militarising the polity. Huntington makes it amply clear that Objective Control is preferable because it is possible to simultaneously maximise military subordination as well as fighting power by increasing the military's autonomy. Huntington's theory is one of the most widely referred works of civil-military literature; he, however, does not enumerate specific measures to increase civilian control over the armed forces.

Morris Janowitz. Morris Janowitz has reviewed the role of changing relationships between the armed forces and the government. He stresses upon the necessity of the military to change its behaviour in relation to technological advances as the lines between peace and war had been blurred, influencing the military to view itself as a constabulary force.² Janowitz's theory states that there must be a greater amount of civilian oversight in military affairs. This conceptualisation has caused the military to become inherently more politicised, necessitating the centralisation of national security within the civilian government, for e.g. formulation of National Security Councils. Like Huntington, Janowitz has little prescription for the best mechanisms, which would allow for increased civilian control and better relationship between the two institutions.

Peter Feaver. Peter Feaver seeks to determine the everyday relationship between the military and the civilian government and

address the 'civil-military *problematique*' through the application of agency theory. More specifically, Feaver's theory works to determine when the military will disobey civilian directives and how the civilian could control this phenomenon. Feaver argues that all civil-military relations theories relate to one simple paradoxical "*problematique*" that "the institution created to protect the polity is given sufficient power to become a threat to the polity."³ When maintaining a military, it is imperative that the force be strong enough to protect its civilians and to carry out necessary military duties; however, any time more power is given to the military establishment, their level of influence over the civilian government directly increases.

Thus, it is evident that the underpinning thoughts which bind the theories of civil - military relations are enhanced impetus on military professionalism, optimum power balance, effective and smooth civilian control over the Armed Forces coupled with greater interaction and synergy between polity-bureaucracy-military triad.

The Impediments

Most of the impediments in civil-military relations arise from institutional deficiencies, perceptual errors and psychologically driven turf wars. These culminate in bureaucratic control without desired expertise and the exclusion of the armed forces from military policy-making, which taken together have a detrimental effect on the military's effectiveness. There are deep sociological, organisational and institutional divides between the political, bureaucratic and military classes in India. The failure of some of the reforms is primarily due to two factors – bureaucratic politics and political apathy.⁴ The succeeding paragraphs analyse these impediments in brief in order to make some recommendations.

Fear of Military Supremacy. First and foremost is the political leadership's unfounded fear that if the armed forces are involved more actively in governance issues which are related to them, they will become too powerful to handle. Somewhere ingrained is the nightmare of a possible military *coup* in their subconscious mind if they dilute civilian control over the military. However, this at best can be described as fertile imagination of uninitiated minds. It is pertinent to mention that India is an established democracy with diversity of varied dimensions rooted across the country

including the armed forces, thus question of a military *coup* does not arise. The very thought itself is libellous to strong democratic foundations of our society, vibrant media and professional armed forces fully committed to upholding democracy and associated values. The supremacy of the Constitution and decisions of the Parliament are conceptually accepted, documented in the doctrines and regularly ingrained in minds throughout military training in the armed forces. Often comparisons about military hegemony are cited from our western neighbourhood without appreciating factors which fuel it, i.e. disregard for constitutional norms, fundamental values and corporate interests of the military.

Political Apathy. Another associated phenomenon is that of political apathy to military matters which is both a cause as well as a result of unfounded fears we just discussed. Only a handful of politicians are interested in defence affairs and fewer still have any expertise in it. Many a times ministers have been appointed in Ministry of Defence (MoD) for varied political reasons and not for their strategic or military acumen or even interest. They are unwilling to push major reforms to avoid taking on any responsibility. The problem is further accentuated when such reforms are in conflict with parochial bureaucratic interests. Pushing such reforms increases the risk of confronting bureaucracy on whose very advice the otherwise uninitiated and ill-informed politicians survive or electoral setbacks. They have nothing to lose electorally as mistakes can be shifted conveniently onto others and the armed forces do not constitute lucrative vote bank. Since Independence, the politicians have not considered it worthwhile to establish workable and cordial relations with the armed forces. Nothing can be more illustrative of this state of affairs than the issue of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), continual degradation in terms of protocol and minimal political support to the issues raised by the armed forces during successive Central Pay Commissions.

Bureaucratic Dominance and Ignorance. Another major issue, and perhaps the one fuelling the former, is the opposition of the civilian bureaucracy to make any amends to the existing setup in which their dominance and control over the armed forces is diminished. Bureaucrats continue to maintain that they are just executing the directions of the political leaders. However, the truth is almost the opposite. Given the political indifference in military

matters, the politicians heavily depend upon advice from the bureaucrats which in turn emerges from often skewed perceptions which the bureaucrats themselves suffer from. The civilian bureaucracy, which is drawn from diverse backgrounds, lacks specialised domain expertise in military affairs. Lack of such expertise has the potential not only to induce weaknesses in defence preparedness but cause avoidable civil-military mistrust. Any pen-wielding bureaucrat may stall, stop or divert the progress of a matter which otherwise, in considered and professional opinion of the armed forces, is critical and fundamental. This has psychologically distanced the armed forces from civilian bureaucracy. Many officers feel detached and there exists increasingly overwhelming disdain towards civil servants. They feel that bureaucrats keep adding to their own perks and privileges and have withdrawn that of the Services over a period of time. The situation becomes more difficult to comprehend for the armed forces when they find themselves coordinating efforts, instead of the very same bureaucracy, in emergency situations like floods, earthquakes and other natural calamities.

Military Procurements. The considerable time delays in weapons procurement process, which is primarily a bureaucratic function in India, has hampered the effectiveness of the military. There has been recurrent lapse of the capital outlay funds from the defence budget as well as the lack of responsiveness of public sector defence companies. The armed forces have, often and repeatedly, expressed their concern over these issues but to no avail as matters are beyond their sphere of influence. In one of the most egregious cases, the Advanced Jet Trainer (AJT) took 22 years to procure and induct. During this time, there have been more than 200 plane crashes in the IAF. It stands to logic that plane crashes that occurred due to pilot error/trainee officers could perhaps have been obviated by a quicker induction of these AJTs. In some other countries, this neglect would be worthy of a class action law suit.⁵

Manpower Shortage. Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has resulted in state-of-the-art modern systems which necessitated induction of personnel with higher educational levels and technological expertise into the armed forces. This is in direct contrast to declining attractiveness of military as a career. There is a shortage of over 52,000 personnel, including 11,000 officers, as per statement of Defence Minister, Mr Manohar Parrikar in

March 2015.⁶ The Indian Army has been beset with officer shortage for over three decades. The shortage is the result of hazards of military service as well as relatively poor pay, perks, facilities and associated social status. More importantly, the persistence of officer shortage as an issue over decades indicates amply that political leaders as well as bureaucracy are not adequately tuned and alive to military issues and concerns.

Inter Service Contentions. Other factors that are important to be considered are the inter-service and intra-service differences on military issues. The three Services often see things differently and, at times, have different views on their role in national security. Instead of attempting resolution, these differences are often exploited by civilian bureaucracy to prevent the three Services from coming to one common ground on issues which would make the armed forces stronger as a coherent entity. One such glaring example is the differences between the three Services on the criterion for appointment of the CDS and bureaucracy thwarting its implementation citing these differences.

Abysmal Strategic Culture. There is lack of strategic culture in our Country which has also contributed to this state of affairs. Military is not actively involved in decision making on security related issues. The culture of developing domain experts in highly specialised fields of warfare is largely absent even within the armed forces as such experts do not find their rightful place in overall security apparatus. Some of the institutions which were created with the aim of developing strategic thought, have been majority staffed with civilian bureaucrats and their assessments often clashed with military assessments of threats and solutions. The idea behind these institutions - developing greater civilian capacity in military matters - was a laudable one, but it became part of a larger effort to control the military.⁷

Lack of Interaction. These problems are not unique to India. Other democracies face similar problems whilst attempting optimum balance in civil-military relations. However, the issue assumes greater and graver dimensions in India as there are limited interface mechanisms for the armed forces to provide professional advice and express their concerns directly to the political leadership. To sum up, the structure of civil-military relations loosely translates into a system where, according to K Subrahmanyam, “politicians

enjoy power without any responsibility, bureaucrats wield power without any accountability, and the military assumes responsibility without any direction.”⁸

Recommendations

Having discussed the theoretical constructs and major impediments in the process of better civil-military relations, it would be prudent to lay down recommendations which are practical and plausible. Any recommendation would not stand test of the time if it does not take into account the realities and is based primarily on utopian view of moral superiority of the armed forces over other stakeholders.

Political Involvement. There is dire need for more active political intervention in concerns raised by the military, especially on Service related issues and issues affecting national security. By virtue of their role in democracy, the politicians are more reactive to the public views and perceptions. Media could play a critical role in bridging this gap and the armed forces must use it dextrously, within the ambit of military decorum and conduct, to raise relevant issues which need to be resolved. The armed forces are apolitical and must continue to remain so; however, there could be a provision in the Constitution for one or two veterans to be nominated to Rajya Sabha so that relevant issues can be highlighted in the Parliament.

Specialised Civilian Bureaucracy. The lack of domain expertise of bureaucracy in military matters due to generalist nature of the administrative and foreign services needs to be addressed in a systematic and gradual manner. The most practical solution to this problem would be the creation of a new vertical specialisation of civil servants on the line of IFS, IRS etc. who have desired expertise on defence related matters. A professional civilian control (administrative, fiscal and procedural) would be in fact beneficial to obviate some of the inter-services acrimony in matters of procurement, high ranking appointments and policy formulation. Another option, which may appear revolutionary yet feasible, is that selection to the civil services be made only after mandatory service in the armed forces. After a specified period of service, all volunteers should be given opportunity to appear for lateral transfer to the civil services. The option of eventual migration to the civil services would be a strong incentive for talented young minds to

join the military. This would substantially reduce the shortage of officers and also enhance overall leadership qualities across these professions.

Cross Training. Regular interaction between civilian bureaucracy and the armed forces at various levels during their respective initial training periods as well as on field would prove catalytic for understanding each other's professions, working ethos and challenges. Field visits for officers, involved in major procurements and policy changes, would not only help them in understanding nuances of the military profession but also needs of the man in the line of fire. There needs to be a substantial increase in vacancies for civilian bureaucrats at higher defence training establishments like the National Defence College (NDC), Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), College of Defence Management (CDM) and Higher Command Courses, as part of their career progression in the MoD.

Enhanced Role of the Armed Forces. The exclusion of the armed forces from crucial decision-making forums on national security thus denying them a role in the policy-making process needs to be addressed at the earliest. The armed forces must be given better representation in these forums. Nothing exemplifies this more than a study of the defunct Defence Minister's Committee (DMC), the formal institution that was supposed to involve the Service Chiefs in decision-making.⁹ Closely related to this aspect is increased presence, integration and active involvement of uniformed personnel in the MoD. Apart from reducing friction between the bureaucracy and the Service HQs, this would be crucial in providing immediate and independent professional advice on military matters.

Jointmanship and Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). It is important that Services attach greater significance to jointmanship and resolve their differences. Perhaps, the most effective and much required reform towards this end is the creation of the post of the CDS. The CDS, as opposed to the Service Chiefs, would be suitably armed to generate most practical solutions particularly on the issues which require three Services to reconcile their priorities. The Government would be benefitted by having a single point of military advice as well as accountability for implementation of the policies. CDS would be instrumental in more efficient, economical and effective

functioning of all the three Services. The unfounded fear of giving a military officer too much power which supposedly haunts the political class as well as bureaucracy is the only impediment in the implementation of a time tested mechanism which is followed by many nations. Some countries use different nomenclature but the functions are similar to that of our proposed CDS like Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) of the USA, *Chef d'Etat-Major des Armees* (CEMA) of France, CDS of the UK *et al.*

Pay and Allowances. One of the major and repeated concerns raised by the armed forces is the continual degradation of the pay and allowances along with associated protocol and social status, they enjoyed at the time of Independence, through successive Central Pay Commissions (CPC). For instance, a Brigadier carried a higher salary than the Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of the Police until the 3rd CPC. Today, Brigadiers are equated to the DIG and, after the implementation of the 7th CPC, it is feared, may be relegated to a lower pay scale than DIGs. Such changes defy reason because only two per cent of military officers achieve such a rank that too after 12 more years of service than the designation of DIG.¹¹ The demands of the armed forces on NFU, equal time durations for promotions, equal allowances in same areas with other central government employees etc. must be discussed impartially and anomalies resolved in a transparent and time bound manner. There must be representation of the armed forces in the Pay Commissions as they form the largest pool of central government employees. A fair and pragmatic approach by the political class on these issues rather than just relying on the recommendations of Pay Commissions would be the single greatest enabler in bridging civil-military divide.

Develop Strategic Think Tank. There is need to develop a pool of civilian scholars, bureaucrats and uniformed personnel who are experts in strategic matters, and national security. They should be consulted by policy makers for weighing various pros and cons of a situation or directive. This requires an attitudinal shift towards national security. These scholars should be allowed access to archival material in the MoD, MEA, MHA and related institutions which must be declassified to the extent feasible. There is a need to focus on security studies in universities to inform, educate and create career streams in these subjects. This would enable a strategic culture where a well-informed dialogue on civil-military

relations, national security, political aspirations and military effectiveness can take place to further improve the system. Establishment of institutions like Indian National Defence University (INDU) is a step in the right direction.

Conclusion

As India aspires to play a greater and stabilising role in the Indian Ocean Region, her rapid economic growth and rise as a military power are the two principal pre-requisites. The efficient conversion of military resources into military power is dependent upon the relationship between the state and the armed forces and amongst the people of these institutions. Over all these years, civil-military relations have focussed largely on ensuring civilian bureaucratic control over the armed forces and not on their effectiveness. This approach has left its negative impact on military modernisation, apart from reducing the sheen of the armed forces as a career for young Indians.

In modern democracies, civilian control of the military is fundamental to the very idea of democracy. However, the level of interaction and degree of control between these two has been a matter of debate and discussion. The civil-military relations in India have been striving for balance over the years. The established democratic setup and recognition of military as an instrument of state policy by the armed forces has kept things in a state of delicate equilibrium over the years. Instead of stabilising with experience, the relationship continues to deteriorate with little or no effort to learn from other democracies. There has been a rising concern amongst uniformed personnel of not being treated fairly by the Government both in decision making process on military matters as well as their status vis-à-vis civilian counterparts. The long pending issue of 'One Rank One Pension' proved to be a lost opportunity for the Government to address the deteriorating relations. The Government will need to transform the way it thinks of defence and dispel concerns of uniformed personnel with concrete actions rather than just rhetoric.

The fine act of rebalancing India's civil-military relations will require major institutional and attitudinal changes. The civil-military relations can prosper only in an atmosphere of trust. The need of the hour is mature, sagacious and pragmatic leadership on both

sides who understand the importance of professionalism and building trust. There is need for enhanced involvement of the armed forces in matters military. The importance of genuine public participation in everything from the security debate to military research and development needs no further emphasis. These measures can only succeed with political will, determination and leadership. If India continues to have weak institutions handling national security it cannot be attributed to bureaucrats and military officers alone. The most comforting thought is that there is general awareness through various committees formed by the Government from time to time as to what ails the system; hence, corrective measures should not pose too much of a problem. It is time to act.

Endnotes

¹ Kathy Roth - Douquet et al, *AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes from Military Service and How It Hurts Our country*, (New York, Harper Collins, 2006), p. 11.

² Samuel P Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p.83.

³ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier, a Social and Political Portrait*, (New York: The Free Press, 1971), p.418.

⁴ Peter D Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight and Civil-Military Relations*, (Boston: The President and Fellows of Harvard, 2003), p.4.

⁵ 'The Absent Dialogue', Anit Mukherjee, A paper presented during seminar on National security in Jul 2009 at New Delhi. www.india-seminar.com. Accessed on 30 August 2016.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 'Armed forces face shortage of over 52,000 personnel' PTI, News article of 20 March 2015, www.indianexpress.com. Accessed on 31 Aug 16.

⁸ 'Military Modernization In India', Sunil Dasgupta & Stephen P Cohen, A paper presented during symposium on Civil - Military Relations in Asia in Jul 2010 at New Delhi. www.india-seminar.com. Accessed on 30 Aug 16.

⁹ Anit Mukherjee, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Declining Status of the Indian Armed Forces' News Article, www.thequint.com. Accessed on 29 Aug 16.