

Understanding Civil-Military Integration in the Higher Defence Organisation

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When war starts, the soldier can only act according to the political and military situation as it exists then.

Heinz Guderian (Panzer Leader, 1953)

Introduction

The military is a powerful institution in contemporary society of states. Irrespective of the form of government, the military is expected to be subservient to the executive and assist it when called upon. On its part, the executive is expected to cater to the genuine requirements of the armed forces and give them their due.¹ In other words, the civilian executive and the military are expected to perform their respective duties and not encroach upon one another's space and, thus, not impede the smooth functioning of the other.

Civil-Military Relations

The term civil-military relations in a broad sense is used to refer to the attitudes and behaviour, which the general public and the members of the armed forces or society exhibit towards each other. In a narrower and, specifically, a political sense, it refers to the relationship of superordination and subordination existing between the armed forces and the lawfully constituted public authorities of the state.

The nature and content of the discussion on civil-military relations varies from one political system to the other. In other words, civil-military relations vary from one country to the other and the issues of concern differ at different points of time. In India, since Independence, the Military has assiduously maintained the tradition of remaining apolitical. The military has, therefore, been a neglected arm of the state. It has also been more or less excluded from the decision making process in matters concerning security and foreign policies. This created a negative effect culminating in the Country suffering humiliation at the hands of China in the 1962 war. Matters have changed since then, but the military is not accorded any significant role in the affairs of the state². Further, interaction between civilians and the military constitutes a critical as well as controversial relationship in any country. Ideally, civil and the military form two distinct domains, each with a specific set of functions. While the decision to go to war is made by the political establishment, the military is responsible for the actual conduct of war on the battlefield³. Yet, this relationship is not as simple as it appears at first glance. There often emerge situations in which the traditional division of responsibility between civil governance and the military becomes blurred; whereas, close interaction is important to achieve national goals.

In India, this relationship between the civilian leadership and the military has not always been smooth. There have been occasions when the military had entered into a dissonance with its political masters. So far India's politicians have countered this by inter-positioning the bureaucracy against the military⁴. The bureaucracy in turn uses inter-service cleavages effectively with the defence secretary being a virtual Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The sacking of Admiral Bhagwat is, by far, the most controversial episode in the gamut of civil-military relations in India. The actual dismissal and the days preceding the dismissal witnessed an acrimonious slanging match between the military and civilian arms of the Government. It had prompted a debate on the subject in the Country and provided an occasion to seriously probe the limits to civilian control, either of the political leaders or of the bureaucracy, over matters concerning the day-to-day functioning of the Armed Forces. It was argued at that time that the civilian arm should define policy and strategic objectives and it was for the military to implement them⁵. Interference in the day-to-day functioning of the Armed Forces would imperil discipline and gnaw at its professionalism.

The Arun Singh committee⁶ had recognised the need for closer cooperation between civil and military bureaucracies. In his proposal, the defence secretary would function as the "principal defence adviser" to the defence minister, while the chief of defence staff would function as the "principal military adviser", and both would enjoy an equivalent status in terms of their working relationship. Further, the Kargil Committee Report⁷ had clearly brought out that "Structural reforms could bring about a much closer and more constructive interaction between the Civil Government and the Services. An effective and appropriate national security planning and decision-making structure for India in the nuclear age is overdue, taking account of the revolution in military affairs and threats of proxy war and terrorism and the imperative of modernising the Armed Forces. An objective assessment of the last 52 years will show that the country is lucky to have scraped through various national security threats without too much damage, except in 1962. The country can no longer afford such ad hoc functioning. The Committee therefore recommends that the entire gamut of national security management and apex decision-making and the structure and interface between the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces Headquarters be comprehensively studied and reorganised."

Based on growing awareness in the country on matters related to strategic and defence planning, the reports of

various government committees, and the media influence on the rapidity of reforms, the Higher Defence Organisation has been revamped and reorganised in recent times⁸. A brief study of the civil-military integration achieved in this organisation will reveal that while some progress has certainly been achieved, there is much more that needs to be done. To improve the efficiency of the existing Higher Defence Organisation further, the need to integrate the Service Headquarters with the Ministry of Defence was accepted in 1991. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) recommended the integration of the Services Headquarters with the MoD and the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Subsequently the Group of Ministers (GoM) approved the setting up of four task forces. These included Intelligence Systems and Apparatus, Internal Security, Border Management and Management of Defence. The Higher Defence Organisation was restructured to cater for future wars, maintain parliamentary control over military, strengthen advisory apparatus to the Government on professional military matters and strengthen budgetary process. However, it was ensured that the changes in the working system were to be minimal.

Higher Defence Organisation at the Apex Level

Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). This is the highest body at the apex level and is the final decision maker on all aspects of security. It is chaired by the Prime Minister and includes the Cabinet Ministers of Defence, Home, External Affairs and Finance. Other cabinet ministers attend as special invitees whenever required. In addition, the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) / CDS and the Service Chiefs are in attendance on required basis. Similarly, the Cabinet Secretary or any other Secretary to the Govt of India will attend whenever required. The CCS is helped in decision making with inputs from various agencies. Some of the important agencies are: -

(a) **National Security Council (NSC).** The NSC deals with all issues that threaten or have the potential to threaten India's internal or external security. NSC is in effect an advisory body; NSC does not have any executive authority. The authority of execution lies firmly within the ministries. The Council and its associated structures are expected to focus primarily on a multi-disciplinary approach to security issues, long and medium range assessment of threats, challenges and opportunities. The NSC comprises five structures – the Council, the National Security Adviser (NSA), the Strategic Policy Group (SPG), the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), and the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS).

(b) **Council.** The six member Council is a Cabinet level body chaired by the Prime Minister. It consists the Ministers of Home Affairs, Defence, External Affairs and Finance. The NSA functions as the pointsman to service the Council.

(c) **Strategic Policy Group (SPG).** The 16 member SPG, comprising the chiefs of the three services, heads of important security related ministries, and heads of the major Intelligence agencies. It is the principal mechanism for inter-ministerial coordination and integration of relevant inputs in the formulation of national security policies. The Cabinet Secretary chairs it.

(d) **National Security Advisory Board (NSAB).** The NSAB comprises a nominated convenor and other people of eminence outside the government with expertise in various fields. NSAB advises the NSC on issues of national security.

(e) **National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS).** The NSCS is a specialised unit under the direct charge of the NSA in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). All ministries/departments consult the NSCS on matters having a bearing on national security. It is headed by Deputy to the NSA, and acts as the Member Secretary to the SPG.

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The CDS will provide the single point military advice to the CCS/RM when appointed. He will ensure the efficiency and the effectiveness of the planning process through inter service prioritisation and also exercise control over the strategic forces. He would rank 'primus inter pares' in the COSC and function as the Principal Military Adviser to the Raksha Mantri. Till appointment of the CDS, the Chairman COSC will perform the tasks of CDS. The CDS/Chairman COSC is assisted in functioning by the HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) under the command of the Chief of Integrated Staff to Chairman COSC (CISC).

Enhancing Understanding of Civil-Military Relations

Effective control of military is what is desired in the democratic world. The military is an asset of the Nation; the elected civilian Government is constitutionally empowered to control and use it to achieve the national goals and is also accountable to the Parliament. Therefore, the civilians who attain the position of controlling the military must have enough knowledge of the military's working system⁹. They should be able to exercise control over the military in the following way:-

(a) **Up-to-date Security and National Security Strategy:** It should be publicly debated and approved by the Parliament.

(b) **Credible resource based plan:** Controlled by the Parliament on what is done and how resources are used.

(c) **Appropriate legislative underpinning:** To support national plans and international objectives.

(d) **Accountability:** To National Parliament and the public in the narrow, financial sense and more generally for policies and operations.

(e) **Adequate security arrangements and access to intelligence:** To facilitate exchange of classified information within government and internationally.

(f) **Effective arrangements for public information:** To ensure transparency in respect of national policies and security forces activities and to respond to points of public and media concern.

(g) **Appropriate military structure:** Organised, trained and equipped to meet national and international obligations and objectives.

(h) **Trained manpower:** Both, the military and civilians should be trained to work in tandem.

It must be debated as to what military strategy is adequate to meet the threats and national security strategy? What are the appropriate military roles, missions and tasks and how they could be prioritised? Does the entire defence organisation fit into these missions? What defence reorganisations are needed and how urgently should they be pursued? What defence planning approach should be used to manage the Armed Forces? The civilian leadership should be able to find the answers to all these questions.¹⁰ To produce the best result, it is obvious that the civilian-military relationship has to be healthy. Also, these relations should be institutionalised.

Civilian control of the military has been suggested as a necessary condition for democratisation. In a democracy, the military serves the country by accepting the authority, the legitimacy, and the leadership of elected officials. The military in India has remained apolitical in the state's affairs due to the mechanism developed to control the military. "Subjective civilian control" is interested in maximising the civilian control of the military through governmental institutions, social classes, or constitutional avenues. "Objective civilian control" can be achieved by capitalising on military professionalism in order to cultivate the professional attitudes and behaviour among the members of the officer corps.

The Way Ahead

India's military has historically been apolitical. Unlike militaries in other developing countries early in the post colonial period, we have never had an instance of the Indian military transgressing its bounds. This has consistently been among the indicators of India's democratic good health. However, this has resulted in the military's marginalisation even in core security decision making structures and processes.¹¹ This refrain in security studies commentary testifies to the continuing distance between the apex military leadership from political decision makers on policy issues.

Continuing security challenges at the sub-conventional plane and the nuclear overhang over conventional conflict necessitate an integrated approach to national security with appropriate structural and process changes. What is required is a fundamental review of the civil-military relationship¹² based on certain premises. It must be recognised that the area of activity encompassing defence planning, defence preparedness, defence administration and defence management – in short, the discourse on national security – is distinct from the specialised aspects of military operations and military training. The bureaucracy has no role to play in the latter, yet the higher military commanders, to function as credible military advisers, must have some level of statutory role in the former.

Undoubtedly, there have been instances where the administrative actions of the bureaucracy have adversely affected the operational readiness of the Services. A strong political leadership, besides a definite charter of duties, is needed to prevent civil-military conflict. The Arun Singh Committee recommendations would require to be taken to their logical conclusion¹³ and the power of a generalist bureaucracy requires to be curbed through the merger of the service headquarters with the ministry. To bring about parliamentary control over this powerful Indian avatar of the Pentagon, greater attention and involvement of the politicians through bipartisan parliamentary committees would be necessary. Procedures bringing in greater scrutiny into defence processes need to be in place.

Conclusion

Rather than banking on the good fortune of possessing sagacious political and military leaders, the emphasis, as rightly highlighted in the Constitution, has to be on establishing institutionalised systems and processes for operational and administrative control of the Armed Forces by civil leadership. It is high time the Indian state displayed the political will to undertake structural reform of its higher defence set-up. This, besides fulfilling the dreams of our Constitution makers, will also provide the military leadership and bureaucracy their rightful place in formulating an integrated and coordinated national security strategy. India has a developing strategic culture in a variegated strategic community; organisational experience in the National Security Council (NSC); and competing power centres in the security field, such as the 'strategic enclave', to lend balance. It is poised at a generational change in political leadership. Its democracy and federal structure are healthy enough to co-opt the military. What is important is that the foundations of civil-military relations should be based on sincerity of purpose, mutual trust, tact, perseverance and above all, professionalism.

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