

Civil - Military Relations*

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There was a temptation to examine the Civil-Military relations in the domestic Indian context in view of the recent face off between the Armed Forces and the Government on account of the 6th Pay Commission report. However, on closer examination of the subject and keeping in view India's emerging position in the world, I felt it prudent and appropriate to take an overall and enlarged view.

During the cold war regions were frozen geographically, politically and economically. Since then the international environment has changed, new centres of power have emerged and some old one's are reviving. The world power structure is being redefined. Globalisation, terrorism and war against it have made the security scenario more intense and complex. Most Civil-Military relation theories are of post World War II and Cold War period and are based on each nation's historic experience. Theories of Huntington and Janowitz are being challenged by James Burke and others, as in the changed environment the problem in democracies is not of civil control over military or separating it from politics. It is more a question of state capacity building and bureaucratic modernisation to meet the emerging challenges of security, which requires democratic governance of defence and security¹.

A word about globalisation and security would be in order. Prof Geogory Foster of American Defence University has defined globalisation as a process which suffuses virtually every aspect of our lives and is inevitable. It assumes so many forms and occurs at so many levels that it cannot be stopped. In such an environment the viability of the State will depend on how it meets the expanding needs of the society. He also concluded that the performance of the military acting as an arm of the State and institution of the society will be instrumental in determining how viable the State remains².

In a globalised environment the importance of being strategic will be greatly enhanced, requiring a strategically effective military providing advice to a strategically competent civilian authority, accompanied by a viable civil society, a critical free press and a military-industrial complex subordinate to society rather than playing a dominant role. In future the effects of action and inaction will be magnified and threshold of crisis for the decision maker and public alike will be lowered, response time for decision reduced and potential for disaster multiplied. In such circumstances need for immediate attention and action mandates close Civil-Military coordination and cooperation³. In the current globalised environment of terrorism the need to be strategic can be best illustrated by the inadequate and ham handed response of the MHA, it needs to fight terrorism at the strategic level and leave the fight against terrorists to the police and the intelligence agencies.

Broad aims of national security continue to be to protect the nation and its institutions against external and internal threats. Internal threats could be due to subversion and internal destabilising forces and threats posed by deteriorating social, economic, demographic and political situations. The later normally graduate to the former with the passage of time due to lack of social and political action. Since both civil and military instruments are involved, Civil-Military relations become a function of security policy and essential for its implementation.

Unlike Pakistan, legitimacy of the political authority has a traditional acceptance in India and holding of periodic elections is our democracy's biggest achievement. However, inspite of it other democratic norms, particularly federalism, have been diluted and power centralised. Political expediency and appeasement of one or the other segment of the society has fragmented its social fibre along religious, caste and ethnic lines. Politics of expediency primarily oriented to electoral arena and power has led to political instability and bad governance, which has resulted in institutional degradation and deteriorating internal situation. This makes the task of executive instruments more difficult and demands greater synergy of thought and action.

While in Western democracies the professional military, over a period of time, has learnt to respect the skills of their political leaders⁴, it cannot be said of our system. Similarly, the concept of civilian control in our democratic system is accepted and honoured by the Armed Forces. But what is worrisome is the misplaced concept of civilian control as to who the controller is? It is the political master and not the bureaucracy, which is just another executive instrument. Without going into the past of why and how, the current state of affairs is dismal. The ignorance of the national security by our political elite has resulted in lack of political direction and ineffective mechanism for formulation and execution of national security policy. The Government response to frequent acts of terrorism is a prime example. The void can only be filled by professional advice to and understanding of it by the political leadership. The preparation for and execution of a war is even a more complex issue requiring intimate and continuous professional advice. The success of 1971 war for the liberation of Bangladesh was essentially due to sound professional advice by late Field Marshall SHFJ Manekshaw, MC and other Service Chiefs to delay operations till the winter, which was accepted by Mrs Indira Gandhi inspite of pressing international and domestic political compulsions. The requirement is for an 'objective' civilian control wherein the power is distributed between civilian and military sides with maximising of military professionalism. What we have in India to-day is a type of subjective civilian control⁵, which is undermining the military security of the country.

Indian Armed Forces like any other institution are conditioned by their functional imperative to meet the growing threats to the country. They have also been influenced by societal imperatives, that is why they are different from the Pakistan Army inspite of common heritage and traditions of the British Indian Army. There is an inherent and natural conflict between the two as military institutions which reflect only social values may be incapable of performing their military role effectively, on the other hand military institutions purely shaped and influenced by military imperatives will be difficult to contain within the society. Interaction and balance between the two is the

hub of Civil-Military relations⁶. The implications and need for this balance are best illustrated by the debate on the “Disturbed Areas and Armed Forces Special Powers Act”.

Officers are the directive elements of the military structure and are responsible for the military security of the society. Similarly, State is the active directive of the society and is responsible for allocating resources among important values including military security. Social and economic relations between the military and rest of the society normally reflect the political relations between the officer corps and the state⁷. This really reflects the core of the Civil-Military relations as also the conflict between functional and societal pressures. The recent so termed face off between the Chiefs of Armed Forces and the Government probably reflects it, if not wholly, at least partially the above phenomenon in a negative sense.

Armed Forces operate at the margin of moral behaviour and they shall obey civilian political authority as long as it appears to be legitimate. The military derives its legitimacy both from its constitutional position and public acceptance of its role, thus its involvement in the affairs of the State has to be properly so within the accepted norms of democracy⁸. The emergency declared by Mrs Gandhi in June 1975, the only deviation from democracy in India left the Armed Forces untouched, inspite of the fact that she had handpicked General Raina, a Kashmiri Pandit to be the Chief of the Army Staff a month before it. It is widely believed that when she asked him to intervene and take over, he not only advised her against it but refused Army's involvement in any manner. He thus upheld the democratic norms and refused to follow directions, which were not legitimate.

The present structure for security and defence planning is flawed and there is no institutionalised professional interaction. The Cabinet Committee of Security (CCS) – (earlier Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs) is the highest policy making body on security and defence matters. The next is the Committee for Defence Planning, which acts as a chain between the CCS and Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), which is the highest policy making body within the perview of the defence forces. The three committees represent the political, bureaucratic and the defence services. Interaction and intercommunication between them is minimal and virtually non existent and mostly during crisis. They work in an isolated fashion. Defence and civil services are compartmentalised to such an extent that these are considered antagonist to each other. The situation had been made worse by the interjection of a Strategic Policy Group and a Crisis Management Coordination Committee under the Cabinet Secretary and a National Executive Committee under the Home Secretary. The Armed Forces have also fallen a prey to the ethos of committee system by forming the “Defence Services Crisis Management Group” under the Integrated Defence Staff. A sneak review of the system confirms that for long term policy planning for defence and security the system is flawed and lethargic and for emergency and crisis it has added to confusion and delays. Committees without proper professional representation and inputs can never take sound policy decisions and neither can they be accountable. Institutions respond to situations and not committees. A prime example of the failure of the system is the response to the recent floods in Bihar. Having constituted the Disaster Management Authority, its basic recommendation of positioning relief bricks got lost in the maze of committees. Who can be blamed? If any thing it has added to the turf war and disjointed actions.

The need for integration of the Defence Services with Ministry of Defence and establishment of the Chief of Defence Staff system as recommended by Arun Singh Committee can no longer be delayed. In conflict situations as in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast, the system has resulted in adhocism and total lack of policy for conflict resolution and management. The concept of Unified Headquarters and Civil-Military liaison committees adopted in conflict areas is only a contraption to soothe the turf war between the administration, para military forces (PMF) and the Army. The need is for unity of command. This existed in the troubled areas of Nagaland, Mizoram and Manipur till late 1980s. It worked well and there was never any problem either with the civil administration, the pmf and the Army. The problem has its roots at the centre, where each head of PMF wants to control (really interfere) in field operations more to establish its turf but without accountability.

Before I get down to the actual functioning and implementation of the Civil-Military relations at the operational level, a word on aid to civil authority is essential. Instructions on Aid to Civil Authority 1970, lay down that aid to civil authority is a constitutional obligation, albeit the instrument of last resort. What needs to be clearly understood is that this is the instrument of last resort and therefore does not bear procedural compliance as is the impression of some junior administrative officers. There have been a number of occasions when request for Army requisition has been made without utilisation of police and pmf resources available with the administration. To prevent this the Central Government has laid down the following additional guide lines:-

- (a)** Employment of troops for normal law and order situations other than having communal overtones may be responded at Command Headquarters at the discretion of GoC-in-C. Army Headquarters will be kept informed.
- (b)** In the case of communal disturbances it will be referred to Army Headquarters and cleared by the COAS and MOD.
- (c)** All election related deployment of troops will be projected by the MHA and cleared by Army Headquarters and MOD.
- (d)** Employment of troops for more than ten days will require sanction of the Central Government.

I intend to suggest some guidelines for actual working of Civil-Military relations at different levels by narrating actual incidents in my experience.

During my visits to the outlying areas in Manipur and Nagaland as GOC, I always made it a point to meet the local officials and functionaries irrespective of their status. My new Aide-de-Camp, a young officer initially thought that I was observing some kind of a traditional ritual but found that the conversations and interaction was related to the area and their functioning. One day he could not contain his anxiety and asked me as to the purpose of my doing it. I told him to figure it out. However, after a month or so I told him that irrespective of how low a status we might think they have, in their own environment and domain they are important, whether an ADC, Circle

Officer, BDO, Gao Burha, Dobashi or a panchayat representative. By giving them respect and importance we help in enhancing their status and build them up among their people and it reinforces their authority and helps in drawing their willing responses. Everyone irrespective of his comparative low status is important in his own environment.

During the Assam agitation in late 1970s, a newly posted DC gave a requisition for dispersal of an agitated crowd to a Major incharge of a column, which had been pre-positioned in anticipation of such an eventuality. Having received the requisition, the Major deployed his men but took no action against the agitators who were over a couple of thousands. The DC asked the Major as to why he was not dispersing the crowd which was shouting slogans, beating drums and utensils and blowing sankhs. The Major told the DC, the demonstration is peaceful, they have done no harm to anyone and not damaged anything, they are just agitating. The young DC told the Major that once he has given the requisition, it must be obeyed and crowd dispersed. The Major told the DC, you have done your duty, I will do mine based on my judgement. The DC complained against the Major to the Commissioner when he visited the area. The Commissioner was a seasoned veteran and explained to him that Major's action was right and if he had taken action as the DC had thought, it would have precipitated the situation. Without discouraging the DC, the Commissioner told him that the Major has 13 to 14 years service and he should respect his age and experience and not let ego come in the way of doing the job. I had similar experience in Manipur while implementing the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. No law is bad, it is its bad implementation which causes problems.

I took over the Division in Manipur and Nagaland at the height of the Meitei insurgency in Manipur and renewed phase of the rejuvenated Naga insurgency in the districts of Nagaland and Manipur bordering Myanmar in May 1981. The situation in the Imphal Valley was so bad that the elected Government had washed their hands off and President's rule had been imposed. Both the Government and the Security Forces (SF) were on the back foot. Administration and police were nowhere to be seen and SHOs had hung their uniform and disappeared. Anything and everything was being guarded, from petrol pumps to all Government Offices, institutions and officials and all civil installations of any consequence. Mr LP Singh, a towering personality and one of our most distinguished and able civil servant, was the Governor of all the seven North Eastern States. A few days later he arrived from Shillong and I went to call on him. During the meeting he outlined the situation as a true professional covering all the core issues. After which he asked me as to what my initial assessment was and as to what should be done. After a brief resume of the situation as I saw, I told him that what we were doing was wrong and that we should get out of the protective mindset and go on the offensive. I told him that to do so I intend withdrawing all Army, Assam Rifles and other PMF under Army's control from protective duties and after reorientating them to go on the offensive to seek and destroy Meitei extremists (ME). I informed him that I intend doing this after thirty days to give the civil administration time to readjust and take overall essential protective duties and throughout this phase I shall help the civil administration and also be available for dealing with any untoward situation. He was visibly upset and told me that he cannot permit this as civil administration was not upto it and there was bound to be a backlash. I issued orders for withdrawal of all Army, Assam Rifles and PMF under the Army's control and to hand over protective duties to Assam Rifles, Armed Police and PMF under the civil administration. I gave a copy of the order to the Chief Secretary. Nothing happened for twenty five days and when I reminded the Adviser, he told me that he will ask the Governor. Two days later Mr LP Singh arrived in Imphal followed by the Home Minister Gyani Zail Singh and the Cabinet Secretary Rao Sahib Krishna Swamy. I received a message from the Raj Bhawan to meet the Home Minister. I sent back a message regretting my inability unless I received orders through Army channels. A couple of hours later I received instructions to meet the Home Minister and convey my point of view. I met him and conveyed my professional assessment and the line of action. Gradually the troops were relieved and we got on the offensive, while simultaneously helping the civil administration, police and PMF under it to be active. Results started coming in slowly with successes in small encounters followed by bigger ones. In July, just two months later, we captured Bisheshwar Singh, the Chairman of PLA and one of the main ojhas (leader) of the seven who had returned from Lhasa. Hearing of it Mr LP Singh flew to Imphal and after congratulating me, told me that my professional judgement was correct and he is happy that I stuck to my guns. While there was sincerity of purpose on both sides, commonality of perception and trust took time. Mr LP Singh was one of my biggest supporters and we developed highest of mutual trust and respect. Due to our professional stance the credibility of both the SF and administration was established.

The foundations of Civil-Military relations in a conflict situation should be laid on sincerity of purpose, mutual trust, tact, perseverance and above all professionalism. Of these sincerity of purpose is most important as we should be quite clear of our long term aim and work towards it inspite of all pressures, and should not compromise these for the sake of good relationship and short term gains. There is a tendency amongst politicians and some bureaucrats to succumb to pressures and wash their hands off unpleasant situations. This results in erosion of Government's image and loss of credibility, which must be avoided. The need is to be frank and even blunt at times but there should never be a break in relationship.

The sphere of our Civil-Military relations are primarily confined to conferences at State level and down to districts and updating of Internal Security Schemes. These are all in the formal domain and deal with only some of the major problems of mutual interest, even these linger on from year to year. There is no continuous and progressive relationship developed between civilian and military officers, there may be odd exceptions. During the British period John the DM, Jim the SP and Joe the local Garrison Commander met regularly socially and otherwise, which projected the Government's functioning in a united and cohesive fashion. Today there is greater need for it as areas of Civil-Military cooperation have expanded beyond routine land acquisition, cantonments, excise, pensioners and ex-servicemen welfare. The disturbed social, political and at times economic environment have made handling of law and order more complex, what to say of terrorism adding more complicities to our internal security situation.

Major Recommendations

The present structure is not conducive for efficient functioning. There is urgent need for reforms and these have to be top-downwards. The CCS should be more representative and include Service Chiefs as professional heads for security and defence planning. Arun Singh Committee report on integration of Service Headquarters with the Ministry of Defence should be implemented.

The Chief of Defence Staff system should be instituted as without it integration will remain flawed irrespective of the Integrated Defence Staff.

The scope of internal security has enlarged. it includes the expanding dimensions of terrorism. there is an urgent need for a long term strategic response and improvement in dealing with it effectively at the tactical level requires immediate attention.

The number of committees should be reduced as you do not govern by committees. they have no accountability and are a hindrance against decision making and implementation. When you constitute committees for specific purposes then its recommendations should be examined and implemented. The cases in issue are the committees on Intelligence, Internal Security, Border Management and Defence, based on Kargil Review Committee Report.

Conclusion

The recent impasse about the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission for Armed Forces reflects the current state of Civil-Military relations and in a way it epitomises what is wrong. There is lack of mutual trust. In my opinion things are heading for sad consequences and in this turf war there will be no victors only victims, the worst sufferer will be the nation. There is an urgent need for a change in the mind set.

While bureaucracy since Independence may feel happy and satisfied to have helped out national leaders in their unfounded fear of a powerful military and rejoice in their success in the down- gradation of the military's status and prestige, it has indirectly degraded national power and cohesiveness of its capability. Inspite of it, military has remained apolitical and the only effective national instrument.

On the sidelines of this known turf war there has been a further silent subversion of the system (including the bureaucracy) by the intelligence agencies who have exploited the hunger for power of our political elite as well as their fear of losing it by opening direct access to PMO and other power centres and wielding undue influence on them. Long tenures of BM Malik, Kao, Santook and the present security set-up should be an eyeopener. There are wheels within wheels in the power structure and the system has collapsed.

Today we depend on the Army and other Services to bail us out of dirty situations resulting due to failures of others. What is worse, we take it for granted and refuse to give them their due. God help the nation when military fails it.

*The article is based on a lecture by the author at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration in October 2008.

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