

India is Totally Safe Against A Military Coup

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“General, what will happen if the whole thing collapses?” was an observation by a respected citizen. He was alluding to the possibility of the political system in the country breaking down with disastrous consequences. “In extreme circumstances, it would not be a bad thing if the military takes over” remarked a respected journalist. These pithy observations were made at the end of my talk at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library on “Civil - Military Relations in India”. My theme was that a military coup cannot take place in India.

These serious observations reinforced my conviction that there must be an open debate on Civil-Military relations for a proper appreciation as also to consolidate democracy in India. We have an ideal model of civil-military relations which is envied even by developed countries. It is flattering that even a hostile friend of India - ex-President Richard Nixon - observes that “Governing India with democracy is one of the most remarkable political achievements in the 20th century.”

In the absence of an open debate, national security policies and organisation of the military are often influenced by suspicions and fears of military coups. If steps are taken in the belief that these will promote civil control over the military, and if these steps result in deterioration of the quality of the officer corps, then the very steps become counter-productive ! There is the danger that the country might lose a war as happened in India in 1962: alternatively, there is a possible danger that a demotivated, disgruntled and unprofessional officer corps becomes the nursery for political activities and breeding ground for conspiratorial cabals, promoting ultimately that very danger which is sought to be prevented.

In this article I shall describe the results of my research culminating in a much-appreciated Paper titled “Civil-Military Relations in India: Its Relevance to Developing Countries” presented in the XIVth World Congress of the International Political Science Association (IPSA) on 28th August, 1988 at Washington, DC.

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I would discuss :

- The meaning of civil-military relations and its importance for successful democratic polity.
- What type of States are prone to military coups?
- What type of officers are inclined to intervene in a country's political system?
- Why is India totally safe from military coups? and
- A look into the future.

The term civilian control originated in the 17th and 18th century in England and her American colony. At that time, the military forces were generally under the control of the Crown and the slogan "civilian control" was adopted by Parliamentary groups as a means of increasing their power vis-a-vis the Crown. Parliamentary control was sought not as a means of reducing the power of the military but as one of the ways of curtailing the power of the Crown.

In a stable and mature democracy, effective civilian control over the military is essential. This means control by the elected representatives of the people and certainly not the bureaucratic structure of the Government, as sometimes "utterly wrongly" interpreted, in India. The reasons for civilian control are twofold. Firstly, that the country must get optimum value for the money spent on defence, and to ensure that the military is competent, effective and professional. Secondly, to ensure that the military does not intervene in the country's politics. The conclusion of scholars is that "higher the degree of professionalism of the Officer Corps and larger their corporate autonomy, the less are the chances of their intervening in a country's politics."

An analysis of 55 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe, where military coups have taken place since the end of World War II shows certain symptoms which make a State prone to military intervention. The primary conditions for military intervention have been identified as the collapse of the executive power, inability of the political system to function within the constitutional requirements, weakness of the political system or the rapid decline in authority. In such environments, the military is either asked to intervene, or it does so on its own! Ineffective, bickering and quarrelling political parties are particularly an important sign of a State prone to military intervention.

Military intervention in civilian affairs is not usually done by military groups. In most cases, civilians turn to the military for political support

when civilian political structure and institutions fail, when factionalism develops and the constitutional means for the conduct of political action are lacking. The civilians, therefore, begin to indoctrinate the military with their political ideologies. The size of a country has a bearing on its proneness to a coup. Barring Indonesia and Brazil, the remaining 53 countries where coups have taken place, are very small. Most of their population is less than Delhi's and in some cases, equal to many mofussil towns. The area of most of these States is equal to or lesser than Haryana State. There is one centre of political and military power which, when captured by a small group, can change the regime.

The involvement of some of these countries in military blocks also make them prone to military take over. For example, at the height of the Dullesian foreign policy, Pakistan was a Member of CENTO. It was an essential requirement of military planning of CENTO that the military takes over administrative control of the country in the event of an attack by the Russians! Proper contingency planning for the running of the country was an integral part of the CENTO doctrine.

Culture also plays a part in military intervention. 19 countries out of 55 victims of military coups are Latin American nations. The Spanish colonial legacy of patron-client relation - a traditional patrimonial system - influenced the outlook of military leaders in these countries: the next group of 16 countries is Islamic.

There are many reasons which motivate military officers of a country to intervene in politics. Obviously, it is always a small group of officers, a few activists, who succeed in propelling the military into politics. What generates political ambition among military officers?

A condition which gave rise to political ambition among military officers in a large number of countries who have been victims of coup, has been their participation in their independence struggle against colonial rule, a revolution or a struggle against an occupying power during World War II. Participation in such a struggle develops a degree of political idealism, which ultimately turns into ambition to wield political power for effecting socio-economic changes and to modernise their countries. There are also examples of what happened in Burma where the majority of the 23 Colonels who had played a key role in administering the military Government were, at one time, either politicians or close associates of politicians. Most of them were involved in the independence movement of Burma and were assigned in a random fashion to careers in the Army and overnight donned military uniforms with "assumed ranks"!

There are cases where officers from deprived sections of society have intervened in politics out of socio-economic grievances, when vast disparities exist in income distribution. Colonel Gadaffi, a bedouin from the desert, imbued with socialistic ideas, decided to capture power when, he, as an ADC to the King, was outraged to witness the unabashed and luxurious life style of the Royal family on a holiday in Europe!

An important factor which politicises an officer corps is the system by which 'civilian control' is exercised. Subjective control is the system when the officers are managed, based on the political reliability. That means promotions and placements are based on the basis of political affiliations of the officer, rather than on his professional competence. To advance in the military hierarchy, the officers willy-nilly are obliged to establish political alliances with their civilian superiors and that thoroughly politicises them.

On the other hand, "objective control" is the system which recognised the autonomous military professionalism, and promotions and placements are left to the military itself. These must naturally be based on professional competence.

One of the primary causes of India's defeat in 1962 was that, due to imaginary fears of a military coup, the country was moving towards a subjective system of control. Mercifully, Mao-Ze-Dong rescued us from a bigger disaster of politicising the military which may well have taken place if we were not defeated in 1962!

We have discussed the symptoms which prevail in a country prone to military intervention; also, the reasons which propel and egg on military officers to intervene in a country's politics. It should by now be obvious that India is a classic case which, due to its continental size, diversity of population and languages, historical heritage, cultural ethos and conscious steps taken by statesmen and military leaders themselves, is virtually immune to praetorianism.

In the 'fifties, there were a number of hush-hush but unfounded fears about this Defence Chief or that Chief planning to usurp political power. These were completely figments of imagination. Most of the coups in 55 countries, happened in this decade and when Pakistani military took over power in 1958, these fears came to a boiling point! So much so that when General P N Thapar, as was expected from a professional and honourable soldier, resigned after the 1962 debacle, a successor was to be found. General J N Chaudhuri was the obvious choice. It was "whispered" to Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Home Minister that General Chaudhuri had political ambitions.

However, a sagacious and experienced Shri L P Singh who was the then Home Secretary showed to Shastriji, Abraham Lincoln's letter to General Hooker while appointing him as Commander-in-Chief during the American Civil War:

"I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac. Of course, I have done this upon what appears to me sufficient reason, and yet I think it best for you to know that ... I have heard in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course, it was not for this, *but in spite of it*, that I have given you the Command. Only those Generals who gain success can be set up as dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship!"

Sure enough, General Chaudhuri was promptly appointed as the Chief: Shri L P Singh while recalling this incident observed that "Military dictatorship in a large country like India was out of question."

India is a federation and has multiple centres of power both in political and military spheres. There are 13 Commanders-in-Chief - 5 of the Army, 5 of the Air Force and 3 of the Navy. If anyone thinks that all 13 of them or even all 5 of the Army, which is largest component, could ever plan and agree to a nefarious and non-professional move to usurp political power, he would be totally unrealistic and unfamiliar with the professional ethos in the Indian defence forces. The multi-regional, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the military is an additional deterrent against usurping political power.

The Indian officer corps took no part in the Independence struggle; hence developed no political idealism. During the Independence struggle, the leaders of the Indian National Congress never tried to involve the officer corps. Unfortunately, the Muslim League leaders assiduously cultivated Muslim military officers. On the creation of Pakistan, they paid a price for it. Officers who fought in the Indian National Army, were honoured for participation in the struggle for Independence, but Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel and other political leaders were sagacious enough to ensure that none stayed on in the Armed Forces!

In our long history only Pushyamitra, the Military Commander is alleged to have usurped power, that too due to mitigating circumstances. Pushyamitra took over power to avoid chaos when the king became mentally deranged and there was no heir. Barring this isolated case, the military

leadership in India has followed the tradition of Bhisham Pitamah, whose unflinching loyalty was to Hastinapur, and was willing to serve the wily Kauravas who illegally usurped Pandava's rights.

Our statesmen and soldiers maintained apolitical traditions and complete non-interference in the political affairs of the country - the hallmark of the old British Indian Military tradition. On Independence, the Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy which, till then, for historic reasons, were technically semi-autonomous components of the Indian Army, were separated and three independent Services were created. There were two reasons - one was to break the image of the most powerful British Commander-in-Chief (next only to the Viceroy) who lived in "Teen Murti House", and functioned as the Defence Minister, and was the symbol of British might in India. Instead, the three new chiefs with their responsibilities attenuated were allotted bungalows in New Delhi, and "Teen Murti House" was occupied by the Prime Minister. This was a sound demonstrative move, extremely well received within the Armed Forces. The other purpose was to allow the small elements of the Indian Navy and the Indian Air Force to grow to their full size and stature. This was particularly required for them to carry out their roles appropriately and was in accord with practice then obtaining in developed nations.

There was no conscious thought of using the three independent Services to play one against the other to exercise control. Indeed, this re-organisation was implemented on the advice of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten who had hoped that after a while, when the two smaller Services came into their own, the time would be ripe to implement the lesson of World War II - that is, to integrate the three services into a well-coordinated, attuned and cohesive defence force. This reform was implemented in the USA in 1953 and in the UK in 1958. In my correspondence with him, when I enquired of Lord Mountbatten as to why he did not advise a similar framework in India, he wrote back to say - "The main reason for not urging an immediate appointment of a Chief of the Defence Staff was precisely that it would be a number of years before a Naval or an Air Force officer would be senior enough to be considered for the appointment. The tragic death of the most senior Air Force officer, Air Marshal Subroto Mukherji in Japan, put back the date by at least a couple of years . . . I could perhaps add that the last time Nehru had stayed with me here at "Broadlands" before the Chinese invasion, I urged him to appoint General K S Thimayya to be the Chief of the Defence Staff straightaway . . . Nehru said Krishna was so bitterly opposed to Thimayya and, indeed, all the really intelligent independent senior officers such as Muchu Chaudhuri, that he was sure he could never get Krishna to agree."

Another step taken was to downgrade the status of military officers. This was right vis-a-vis the elected representatives of the people. However, in the bureaucratic machination there were some down gradation of military officers compared to the Bureaucrats, which has created considerable amount of unhealthy competition: competition for status between the bureaucracy and professionals is a well recognised malaise in all democratic countries, and India is no exception. However, Civilian Authority, as symbolised in the elected representatives of the people, must be paramount in a democracy.

The major lesson we learnt was from our defeat in 1962. Since then, the military enjoys internal autonomy in the crucial matter of selection, promotions and placements, even though these are and naturally must be approved by the Raksha Mantri. The collective judgement of the senior military officers who participate in these matters are respected unless there are weighty reasons indicating an injustice. The yardstick is the professional competence and service, and not political affiliation or political views.

Similarly, a convention has developed that the senior-most C-in-C of the Army/Air Force/Navy is selected as the Chief unless there are very weighty and strong reasons against it. This is the correct policy and helps in keeping the military apolitical.

The senior military officers have been wise enough to assiduously resist employment of the military on law and order duties. Unfortunately, we still have the old Imperial system under which the Deputy Commissioner of a district can requisition the help of the military, and the military is obliged to assist when such demand cannot be made even by the Chief Minister of a State! This provision gives a lazy man's option to our administrators when they face difficulties and adopt the line of least resistance. There is a very sound reason for senior officers to be reluctant to get into law and order duties. Nothing politicises a soldier more than to get mixed up in maintaining law and order in a democracy, not to speak of the adverse effect on training of troops if constantly used in aid of civil power. Pakistanis paid a heavy price for misusing the military. One hopes that, when powers are decentralised to District Panchayats, suitable provisions would be made to make requisitioning the military for maintaining law and order more difficult than it is today.

An ingenious measure was adopted during the 'fifties of starting public schools, named Sainik Schools. These were set up to educate young bright boys from all strata of society with special incentives for children of low income group amongst our citizens. These institutions were designed as nurseries to groom young boys as future military officers. This broad-basing

of the officer corps has not only provided upward social mobility to brighter youth, but has also brought the military leadership closer to our polity. This is a positive step to keep the military in tune with our society.

What should be done to consolidate this fine tradition of keeping away from the country's politics which has prevailed among the officers of the Indian Military? It has been aptly said that there are no good or bad armies. There are only good or bad officers. An important step which will contribute most to the country's integrity and security as well as consolidation of democracy, is to take steps which will contribute to the excellence in the quality of the officer corps. It is suggested that a National Commission may be appointed with the statutory provision that its recommendations will be implemented to look into the following areas and make appropriate recommendations for adoption: Firstly, take a total look at the terms and conditions of the officer corps so as to make sure that the cream of youth in the country comes forward to defend the motherland for a full career or short periods of time. Secondly, to achieve this we must follow the practice prevalent in most countries of the world that only one third of the officer corps needed in our Armed Forces, serve for full life; the remaining two-third come in for periods ranging from 3 to 10 years, and are then statutorily sidestepped into other appointments controlled by the Government. Lastly, promotions and appointments in the military are totally insulated from non-professional and other extraneous influences.

If these suggestions are implemented, the great traditions in the Indian military before and after Independence, will be consolidated and reinforced to make our country great and be an effective instrument for peace, stability and progress.