

Civil-Military Relations: 1947-2020

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Introduction

Civil-military relations in India have undergone a remarkable transformation over the last 70 years. From a relationship where the military had minimal scope to influence strategic policy, Indian civil-military relations today are characterised by greater collaboration, coordination, and synergy. Collaboration, however, has not always meant consensus. There are moments when civil-military relations appear fractured or in conflict, sometimes subject to rancorous debates, but mostly maturing with time. Civilian control of the military in India remains firm and is, perhaps, one of the striking testaments to the resilience of Indian democracy. This article offers a sketch of how civil-military relations have evolved over time including the operational, military, and strategic issues they contend with.

Boundaries in civil-military functions have never been perfect, experiencing shifts during different periods in India's history even while political leaders maintained their ability to determine the nation's strategic policies. The adage that 'the military fights wars while civilians make policy' has largely held true in the Indian case. The complexity of understanding civil-military relations is perhaps best summarised by one of India's prominent military historians. "The notion that there is an inviolable operational domain where the military's writ runs supreme has been problematic. As a principle, it is rather a slippery one. There are no clear boundary lines dividing tactics, operations, strategy, and policy. Even tactical actions could hold important political implications. Besides, the key question is who decides where the boundaries run. In practice, the military has somewhat insisted that it should define what counts as operational. This has enabled the military, as we shall see, to trespass into areas that should be the preserve of the political leadership."¹ What follows is a discussion of Indian civil-military relations in historical phases.

1857-1947: Pre-independence

After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and in the years following 1858, the colonial Indian Army was reorganised and came to embrace the theory of martial races. "Those who rallied to the British cause, for whatever reasons of their own, such as Punjabi Sikhs and Nepali Gurkhas, won favourable commendation at the time and subsequently secured a preferential entry into the reorganised Indian Army."² The Indian Army, "Found employment overseas in two related kinds of imperial enterprises: the initial conquest of new territories; and the subsequent suppression of rebellions when reliable local forces did not exist or were insufficient for the task".³ It made British expansion possible as far as Mesopotamia, Malaya, and East Africa.⁴

Indian soldiers were active participants in the British Army during both, the First and Second World Wars. 1.5 million Indians fought as part of the British colonial army during World War I, the largest contingent of soldiers from among the British colonies.⁵ During the Second World War, the Battle of Kohima and Imphal, acknowledged as one of the bloodiest, served a deadly blow to Japanese forces in Burma. "The Japanese regard the battle of Imphal to be their greatest defeat ever", said Robert Lyman, author of 'Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India 1944'. And, it gave Indian soldiers a belief in their own martial ability and showed that they could fight as well or better than anyone else.⁶ The 1942 Grady mission led by Henry Grady, who was later appointed the first US Ambassador to India, developed a plan that made India a significant arms producer. Since Britain was unable to spare equipment, expertise, or raw materials, it was proposed that the United States would help India expand production lines and manufacture or assemble military systems.⁷ The Indian Army mostly inherited the British regimental structure post-independence. The Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (VCOs) of the British-Indian Army continued as Junior Commissioned Officers in the Indian Army.⁸

1947-1960: Restructuring and Restraint

The period after India's independence was one that compelled its leadership to focus inward on domestic reconstruction and nation-

building. In this scheme of things, civilians had little time for the military. India's defence, while vital, was not the item that dominated political priorities. Given rising Cold War tensions, Indian civil-military relations emerged in an environment of non-alignment where India disassociated itself from external alliances/partnerships. The liberation movements in Asian and African countries in the 1950s and 60s and the unity that India provided to their shared mutual goals of freedom from colonial rule remained a common theme. In the context of the scars of partition, the accession of Kashmir to India, and unrest in the northeast, the military was required to perform its duties as aid to civil and political authorities solely in the maintenance of law and order. In the aftermath of the 1947 war, India's strategic thinking rested on four pillars: to maintain conventional military superiority over Pakistan; to maintain friendly relations with China; to stay free of Cold War politics and entanglements; and to promote solidarity and cooperation among developing countries.⁹ Given the tribal invasion in 1947 and its war with Pakistan, India appeared to be more wary of the former than China. It recognised the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, accepted China's sovereignty over Tibet in the Seventeen Points Agreement of 1951 and signed the Panchsheel Agreement in 1954.¹⁰

On defence matters, the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru accepted most of the recommendations of British defence scientist PMS Blackett. The 1948 Blackett Report outlined policies on military spending and strategic posturing. Blackett recommended scaling back on military expenditures and focus on the threats in the north-west. Based on its recommendations, the government pushed infrastructure for technology development over military readiness.¹¹ Through the 1950s, India's defence budget was cut and remained far shorter in comparison to the defence budgets of both Pakistan and China, minimising its conventional military capabilities.¹² While external involvement of the military was limited, it was active internally in Kashmir, Hyderabad, and Goa. The Indian military also became active in international peacekeeping missions in Congo, Gaza, and Korea.

1960-1980: Institutions, Agencies, and Agreements

The 1960s and 70s brought significant institutional changes in Indian civil-military relations, following India's 1962 defeat in the war with China and China's declared nuclear status in 1964. The much-publicised friction between the then Defence Minister Krishna Menon and General Thimayya revealed deeper problems in Indian civil-military decision-making, influencing political leaders to give the military autonomy in operational decisions during the 1965 war. New Delhi set up various committees to facilitate civil-military dialogue and engage the military on strategic issues. Regular meetings between the three Service Chiefs and the Defence Minister were institutionalised.¹³ After the 1971 war, the Political Affairs Committee of the Cabinet was established. The Policy Requirements Committee was also created to elicit regular military feedback. When China conducted its nuclear tests in 1964, it began building a strong strategic and military partnership with Pakistan. To counter the two-pronged threat, New Delhi increased defence spending and sought an alliance partnership with the former Soviet Union.¹⁴ India also signed important agreements with Pakistan, and one with the Soviets. The Tashkent Declaration was signed by then Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistani President Ayub Khan, after the war between the two countries in 1965.

The historic Soviet-India Friendship Treaty was signed in 1971 which secured the diplomatic and military foundations of the partnership. The 1972 Shimla Agreement was signed with Pakistan after Bangladesh was liberated, and Pakistani forces surrendered. The Shimla Accord established the 1949 United Nations (UN) endorsed ceasefire line – the Line of Control (LoC) – as the de facto border between both countries. Despite suffering a stinging defeat by the Chinese, but succeeding in 1965 and 1971, India still maintained a relatively ambivalent and relaxed position on military affairs. Its first nuclear test in 1974 was purely for peaceful purposes, disconnected from any strategic or military objective. This position, of course, would change in later years as Pakistan developed a significant nuclear weapons capability with China's support. India's 1998 declared nuclear status and shift to develop nuclear technology for strategic purposes would be the

apotheosis of the Pakistan-China relationship. Pakistan and India would use the 1980s to simultaneously build their nuclear weapons capabilities, each side driven by mutual suspicion of the other's intentions. By the late 1980s, Pakistan was beginning to publicly declare its nuclear weapons capability.

1980-2000: Insurgencies, Pakistan, Nukes, and Civil-Military Tensions

The 1980s introduced a shift in the way civil-military relations in India would mature. The Punjab unrest, the 1986-87 Brasstacks crisis, the beginning of an insurgency in Kashmir in 1989-1990, the 1998 nuclear tests, and the debate on whether nuclear weapons can be used for strategic ends changed the contours of Indian civil-military relations. Perhaps, it became necessary for India's political leaders to address 'how much authority, in strategic affairs' they intended to cede to the military. For far too long, civilians had maintained a tight rein on the military, but external circumstances and domestic politics were beginning to change that.

The early 1980s, and the Punjab crisis generated by the Khalistan movement, set in motion several events that would involve the Indian military in operations that later undercut its image and reputation, notwithstanding inviting a change in perceptions even within the military. The Indian Army's action on the Golden Temple to flush out Khalistan terrorists proved costly for Indira Gandhi, who paid for it with her life when she was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. The subsequent anti-Sikh pogrom, which led to the massacre of more than 3000 Sikhs, further complicated the Indian civil-military relations.

Three crises – 1983-84; 1986-87; and 1990 – just short of war with Pakistan, placed major strains on Indian civil-military relations. But perhaps the most important crisis in terms of its impact on civil-military relations was Brasstacks, a military exercise designed to test the Indian military's readiness, launched in 1986 that came on the heels of previous mini exercises. The military exercise followed by the crisis it generated did much to accelerate both India and Pakistan's road to nuclear acquisition. It

also fundamentally altered civil-military relations. "In the mid-1980s, senior Indian military officers had mixed opinions about the value of large-scale military exercises, although the majority, including Sundarji, felt they were imperative every few years, especially for 'learning to handle large formations and bodies of men'."¹⁵ Some members of the Indian Army believed that the army was restructuring itself to improve its mobility and strike capabilities. This restructuring focused on converting two infantry divisions into RAPID formations designed to be partly mobile, yet capable of holding territory.¹⁶ Pakistan viewed these moves with alarm, believing the Indian military was preparing to mount an offensive attack. To make matters worse, the Ministry of Defence was unaware of the assurances the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had made to his Pakistani counterparts of scaling down operations. There appeared to be many gaps in communication between military and civilians in India, and between New Delhi and Islamabad. Arun Singh, the then de facto Minister of Defence, also seemed to signal that "Indian Armed Forces were going to develop new strategies and induct new weapons, but that the nuclear option was being reconsidered at the highest level".¹⁷ From the perspective of Indian civil-military relations, traditional boundaries of civilian and military control appeared diluted.

The beginning of the insurgency in Kashmir posed a new problem for India's civilian leadership. To what extent would the military be allowed to participate in counterinsurgency operations? While the military had been deployed to aid civilians in the maintenance of law and order during times of domestic turmoil and crises, squashing a mass rebellion that had the full backing of an external state risked compromising the military's professional role as defender of the nation's sovereignty. This complex reality changed, much to the detriment of the military's image, the way civilians would conduct their relations with the military, often placing the military at greater risk both personally and professionally. The first step to quash the mass insurrection was the creation of a specialised counterinsurgency force, called the 'Rashtriya Rifles', tasked with conducting small-scale operations through frequent cordon and search operations and sometimes using internal spies to create a counterinsurgent force called Ikhwan.¹⁸ Several legislations were implemented to protect the

scope and actions of Indian paramilitary and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) but these legislations came with a high price. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), introduced in 1958 in the Naga insurgency and enforced in the north-east in the 1950s and 1960s, was extended to Kashmir during the outbreak of armed militancy.¹⁹ AFSPA continues to be a controversial piece of legislation giving the Armed forces of the Union²⁰ (which includes Central Armed Police Forces and paramilitary) protection from legal action while conducting counterinsurgency operations unless the Central government sanctions it. The BP Jeevan Reddy Commission was asked to recommend whether the Act should be amended or replaced. The committee submitted its report in June 2005 in which it recommended repealing AFSPA. Around the same time, the second Administrative Reforms Commission also recommended scrapping the Act. Further, police and military functions began to merge or overlap placing significant strain on the Indian Army's capability and reputation. Debates over these roles and the extent to which police and military functions need to be separate to maintain the professionalism of the armed forces are frequent, yet mostly unresolved. Moreover, police reform, too, has become an essential component of these roles. Given the criticism directed at the security forces – even if unsubstantiated – for instances of alleged human rights violations in Kashmir that include rapes, enforced disappearances, torture, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and the use of pellet guns that have blinded scores of Kashmiri civilians, management and accountability in how the CRPF and other security forces conduct operations is paramount, though a largely neglected political issue.

2000-2020: Doctrinal Innovation, Modernisation, and Reform

As India prepared to build capabilities to fight a two-front war with Pakistan and China, several doctrinal changes were implemented in the last two decades that suggest a shift toward more offensive-oriented military doctrines. As a response to the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament and *Operation Parakram*, the Indian Army produced a new limited war doctrine called Cold Start. To plug the holes in the India's conventional military doctrine and meet Pakistan's provocation, Cold Start intended to develop

the capability to launch a retaliatory conventional strike against Pakistan while keeping the conflict below the nuclear threshold. The doctrine demanded “a reorganisation of the Indian Army’s offensive power away from three large strike corps into eight smaller division-sized Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) that combined mechanised infantry, artillery, and armour” that had the ability to launch multiple strikes into Pakistan along several different centres of attack.²¹ In 2019, the India Army’s XVII Mountain Strike Corps headquartered in Panagarh, West Bengal was operationalised. This corps has been specifically designed to undertake offensive operations across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. The formation of a new strike corps indicates or suggests a change in the way India views its deterrent relationship with China.²² The 2019 ‘Him Vijay’ exercise deployed three IBGs that were brigade-sized formations with integral artillery firepower to conduct offensive operations. The troop strength of these IBGs suggests that the Indian Army is aligning itself with the logistical necessities of mountainous terrain.²³

Sophistication in weaponry and upgrades in military technology remain below expectations. According to defence analyst and expert, Ajai Shukla, one of the obstacles to the Indian Army’s modernisation is ‘too many personnel and too little firepower’. Shukla argues that “the army needs to shed 200,000-300,000 personnel and divert the savings into battlefield fire support, especially artillery and light attack helicopters, and further compensate for manpower reductions with investments in real time surveillance and command systems”.²⁴ Similarly, Shukla advocates several steps that are urgently required to modernise the air force and navy. The Indian Air Force (IAF) needs to upgrade its Sukhoi – 30MKI and Jaguar fleets while adopting multi role combat aircraft. The IAF should oversee the Tejas Light Combat Aircraft and Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft projects. The Tejas fighters can be used to replace obsolete MiG-21 and MiG-27 fighters.²⁵ The air force is also operating below its 42-squadron threshold at 34 fighter squadrons. The navy requires more surveillance instruments, satellites, long-range shore-based radars and long-range maritime surveillance aircraft like the P-8I Poseidon, and Sea Guardian drones. The warship fleets are in

dire need of helicopters for anti-submarine and airborne early warning roles.²⁶

To promote integration of the three Services and facilitate efficiency in war time's crises, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), a single point commander for all three Services on warfare and nuclear issues. The primary goal is to enable a more holistic, tri-Service approach to military force structuring and operational planning. The CDS was first proposed after the Kargil war in the recommendations of the Subrahmanyam Report. The idea finally came to fruition in December 2019 when General Bipin Rawat, former Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), was appointed the CDS. The creation of joint theatre commands has also been on the agenda for a while, sometimes generating friction between the army and air force. India has 17 military commands in addition to the Strategic Forces Command and the Andaman and Nicobar Command, the only tri-Services integrated theatre command. As CDS, General Rawat has revealed plans to have five theatre commands along the border with Pakistan and China. There may be a separate command for J&K; and another on the border south of Jammu. The proposed peninsular command will be formed by merging the navy's western and eastern commands and spread from the Sir Creek near the Arabian Sea to the Sundarbans in the Bay of Bengal. Rawat said that the planned air defence command, which will combine the air assets of the Army, IAF and Navy, will be rolled out by mid-2021. The peninsular command will be rolled out by the end of the next year and India's theatre commands are expected to be ready by 2022.²⁷ Given the possible changes in conventional military doctrines, the nature of India's nuclear command and control system and its No-First-Use (NFU) policy have also been the centre of widespread debates and discussions. After the Balakot strike on Pakistan in response to an attack that killed over 40 CRPF military personnel in Kashmir, strategic commentators wonder whether India might, in future, consider pre-emptive strikes that would call for a fundamental evaluation of its current NFU doctrine especially since Pakistan has always maintained a nuclear posture that could impose unacceptable damage to India in the face of a conventional attack. Would this push India to a counterforce posture?²⁸

Conclusion

Indian civil-military relations have witnessed numerous moments that have fundamentally altered the perceptions and debates between India's political leadership and its military. Even while civilian control remains supreme, the relationship has experienced contentious periods when civilians abdicated responsibility, gave poor directions resulting in poor policy, or attempted to politicise the military.

Endnotes

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CL, No. 622, October-December 2020.