

United Service Institution (USI) of India: Vision and Transformation 2030

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“For nearly 100 years, USI has been of great use to the professional Soldier, Sailor and Airman. It has kept them up to date in their outlook and military matters and has done to foster an inter-service feeling. It is necessary that all of us — the Ministry of Defence, the three service Headquarters and individuals — who are interested in the territorial integrity of this country should take an active personal and continuous interest in the success of the institution.”

Field Marshal KM Cariappa,
All India Radio Speech in February 1949

Introduction

In the last 150 years since its inception, the USI of India has emerged as India’s pre-eminent think tank on matters of national security. During the pre-independence period, the USI had played a leading role in shaping the strategic thought of British Empire — not only on how to rule India but also in generating informed policy debates on its expeditionary forays in the strategic neighbourhood of Afghanistan, Tibet, China, Burma and elsewhere. Much of those perspectives and reflections are encapsulated in the old journals of the USI and the plethora of archives preserved in the USI library. Post-independence, the USI has transformed into a typical track 1.5 institution that has rendered ‘yeoman’ service in developing strategic culture amongst the policy-makers and strategic community of modern India. The USI has acquired a unique multi-disciplinary character vis-à-vis other think tanks in terms of its activities, which range from historical research to publications of diverse literature, career progression of military officers, and a niche in net assessment, scenario building and

strategic gaming. The year 2020 marks the celebration of the 150th Anniversary by way of organising special events such as making a documentary on the awardees of MacGregor medal, publication of selected articles from last 150 years of USI journals, special commemorative issue of the journal, a book on the history of USI, release of postage stamp, wreath laying at the National War Memorial, and the conduct of an international seminar. Even though the Covid pandemic has somewhat hampered the physical conduct of planned activities with fanfare, our enthusiasm remains strong to complete the roadmap of the 150th year celebrations using digital platforms where they can be used. While it is good to bask in the glory of this heritage institution, one cannot ignore the necessity to reflect on challenges the USI faces and the opportunities it could seize. More importantly, the abiding need of the moment is to have a new vision and a comprehensive roadmap for the USI to transform itself in the coming decade.

Challenges

The major challenge faced by the institution is the perennial financial resource crunch. The USI was raised as an autonomous body so as to allow the institution significant freewheeling in critical thinking and articulation of alternate views in policy debates. Post-independence, the USI closely worked with the Service HQs and received full staffing and administrative support in its functioning. Being the only 'Think Tank', it was widely patronised by the service officers, diplomats, civil servants, academia and other members of strategic community. The USI received support from the then Prime Minister and the Service Chiefs for the construction of its majestic new premises. However, since it's shifting to the new location in 1996, our expenditure grew exponentially whereas the sources of income remained miniscule. In the meanwhile, the three Service HQs raised service specific think tanks, which functioned directly under their tutelage. With the raising of HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS), instead of utilising the USI as a tri-service think tank, a new think tank 'Centre for Joint Warfare Studies' (CENJOWS) was raised. Each of these four new think tanks were provided corpus from the Ministry of Defence (MoD), besides financial and administrative support from

respective headquarters. In contrast, USI, India's oldest and premium think tank, got not only overlooked but was also left to fend for itself. Moreover, in the past three decades many other government and privately funded think tanks have mushroomed, thus, encroaching upon USI's long-held sway in the field of strategic discourse.

The USI incurs huge expenditure in maintaining its infrastructure and payment of salaries to its staff that is governed by labor laws. The institution faces paucity of funds for inducting multi-disciplinary research talent. Earlier, each Service used to depute about three scholars on study leave to research at the USI. However, with the passage of time, the number of uniformed scholars assigned to the institution has dropped considerably; the Service-specific think tanks are accorded higher priority. The Corona induced lockdown has badly disrupted assured flow of income accruing from the USI Residency guestrooms, restaurant, rent from seminar rooms, membership, and conduct of courses and projects. In order to tide over the ongoing financial crisis, the staff has voluntarily accepted temporary curtailment in pay and allowances till the situation improves.

Opportunities

While the institution faces challenges of finance and ownership by the Services, new opportunities are coming its way. The institution has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Assam Rifles, India's oldest paramilitary force, for cooperation in research and conduct of annual events. The Assam Rifles have funded a Chair of Excellence for undertaking research on India's north-eastern region — the strategic gateway of India's 'Act East' policy. The annual Assam Rifles memorial lectures are now being organised under the aegis of USI. Efforts are afoot to invite Assam Rifles units and officers to become USI members. Another Chair of Excellence is being funded by India's War Wounded Foundation for undertaking research and organising lectures at the USI to highlight problems of war wounded soldiers, sailors and airmen, and build up a national narrative for their rehabilitation in society.

The Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS), thanks to untiring efforts of its Secretary, Squadron Leader Rana Chhina, has emerged as an accomplished node of excellence at the national and international level. Its expertise is much sought after in providing consultancy for curating the National War Museum, writing of Indian Army history, digitization of historical archives, and for preparing themes for the celebration of India's grand 1971 war victory that led to birth of Bangladesh. The CMHCS is most ideally suited for mentoring the proposed Military Heritage Trust of India. The services of the USI can be optimally utilised to enlighten the young generation about India's rich military heritage and traditions — a sure way of imbibing national pride and patriotism in our youth.

Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3) is the hub of USI research work. The domain expertise of CS3 in strategic net assessments, scenario building and strategic gaming is much sought after by the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), MoD, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Service HQs, premium military and civil training establishments, and universities in India and abroad. The USI, together with the DRDO, is toying with the idea of developing a National Strategic Gaming Model for India. The USI has a cherished tradition of grooming military officers and in their career progression. The USI is fast-emerging as a node of excellence of higher learning for senior Indian and foreign military officers. New opportunities are arising for utilising our knowledge and facilities for conduct of customised Jointmanship workshops, Core programme for senior military officers and specialised training programs such as Executive NDC, International Strategic Security and Defence Management Programme for senior ranking foreign military officers. The USI, in essence, can be used as the institution of choice for enhancing defence diplomacy, as part of India's foreign policy outreach initiatives.

The USI had raised and nurtured the Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping (CUNPK) for 12 long years, before it was adopted by the Indian Army as its unit. USI is a founder member of global UN networks namely, 'Challenger's Forum' and 'Forum of Effectiveness of Peace Operations Research Network (EPON)'.

The USI, with its wide institutional knowledge and resource faculty that is endowed with rich diplomatic and operational experience in UNPK, could easily be harnessed to address policy and doctrinal issues concerning UN Peacekeeping. The USI, in tandem with CUNPK, can enhance India's stature in generating policy debates for reforming peacekeeping and show-casing India's potential in capacity building at the regional and global level.

Vision

It is aptly said, 'when vision is clear, decisions are always easier'. The founder of USI, Colonel (later Major General) Charles Metcalfe MacGregor established the institution with a lofty aim, "for the furtherance of interest and knowledge in the art, science, and literature of national security in general and of the defence services in particular". The regulations were drawn with such foresight that they are still applicable today, albeit with minor modifications necessitated due to changed circumstances. Since those formative years, the USI Governing Council and its sagacious secretaries / directors have continually nurtured the institution during its glorious journey. Post-independence, the institution was led by distinguished scholar soldiers and each one of them made significant contribution in enhancing the stature and reputation of the institution. In 2004, a sub-committee chaired by Vice Admiral PS Das, and comprising Lieutenant General SK Sharma and Air Marshal Bharat Kumar prepared the USI Vision Paper 2020. The vision paper was approved by the USI Governing Council on 14 January 2005. The document inter alia underscored the need for the USI to work closely with the Services while maintaining its traditional autonomy. Creation of centres viz, CMHCS, CS3, and CUNPK (now CMHCS) was in keeping with enhanced scope envisioned in that document.

In last 15 years, unprecedented developments have taken place in the field of geopolitics, strategic security, revolution in military affairs (RMA), and research methodology. It is now time for the USI to imbibe digitisation and adopt a holistic approach to research work. The need of the hour is to formulate a new vision for the USI for the coming decade. My association of more than four decades as a life member of the USI, a decade of experience

with CS3 and one year as Director impels me to suggest a vision for the USI. My considered vision is to ***‘consolidate transformation of USI into a digitally enabled premier Track 1.5, multi-disciplinary national security policy research institution, with core competency in strategic security, scenario gaming, military doctrinal thought, historical research, career progression learning programs and defence diplomacy while preserving its rich heritage and unique character as India’s oldest think tank’.***

Transformation 2030

Keeping in view the suggested vision articulated above and the environmental realities, the focus for next 10 years should be as elucidated below:

- **Resource Generation.** Enhance income by optimally marketing USI domain expertise and infrastructure, undertake membership drive, generate competitive bids for ‘Net Assessment’ projects from government establishments, seek sponsors for events and elicit support from the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), HQ IDS, Service HQs and other interested entities such as DRDO, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) etc.
- **Harmonising with DMA, HQ IDS and Services.** Identify their knowledge, advocacy and training needs and align USI research work and other activities to meet the same. Make USI as a bridge between the Services, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), NSCS, DRDO and other establishments on matters military
- **Induction of New Talent for Research.** With the improvement in financial status, induct multi-domain experts who have flair for critical thinking and innovative research, combining modern tools of research with practical wisdom. Lay added focus on questioning of conventional wisdom and on formulation of scientifically derived alternate perspectives and policy choices.

- **Focus of Research.** Lay added focus on national security strategy and structures, new generation warfare, grey zone conflicts, non-traditional security, threat perception and capability scans, disruptive technologies, joint doctrines, military strategy, operational art, jointmanship, force structuring and development.
- **Brand Name in Net Assessment and Strategic Gaming.** Hone domain expertise in Strategic Net Assessment, Scenario Building and Strategic Gaming at the national level. Develop a National War Gaming Model in conjunction with the DRDO and leverage USI's potential as a National War Gaming Centre.
- **Enhance Reach of Publications.** Convert the USI journal in e-format and promote it on various digital portals. Produce high-quality policy research papers, pitched at the strategic level, for use by policy makers.
- **Promote Domain Expertise in Consultancy in Military History.** Showcase CMHCS as a repository of India's Military Heritage and node of excellence for consultancy services in curating war museums, memorials, staff rides on epic Indian battles and research on post-independence military history.
- **E Education.** Explore feasibility of conducting on line courses and contact programmes for promotion and competitive examination for Service officers.
- **Digitisation.** Produce and propagate high-quality digital content with media partners and promote it through social media platforms such as USI Facebook Page, Twitter handle and You Tube Channel to USI members and the environment.
- **Visibility and Outreach.** Enhance visibility and outreach through the following means :
 - Social Media Platforms
 - Fortnightly email updates to USI members.

- Outreach to military establishments, IAS Academy, National Police Academy, Foreign Service Institute, foreign missions and lastly, universities in India and abroad.
- Production and propagation of digital knowledge content such Strategic Insights with Strategic News International, USI Strategic Dialogue and Braintrust series produced with the help of Peninsular Studio.
- Improve USI website and make it user and mobile friendly.
- Expand Track 1.5 Dialogues with foreign think tanks.
- Joint projects and events with foreign think tanks.

Conclusion

In the 150th year of its existence, the USI has published a brief history of the institution, taken out a publication on selected articles from the old journals and seeks to produce a digital episode on the Macgregor's medal. The commemorative journal issue has the memoirs of two distinguished directors; Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar and Lieutenant General PK Singh who individually had more than a decade long stint as head of the institution. The issue also contains the short biographies of two legendary directors, late Colonel Pyara Lal and late Major General Samir Sinha, who nurtured the institution with great foresight and dedication. These writings and biographies motivate us immensely. I am aware that my vision for the USI and roadmap for transformation in the next ten years are goals which are not easily achievable. A quote which encapsulates my thoughts in this context is, "We are kept from our goals, not by obstacles, but by a clear path to a lesser goal". We will not get tempted to go on the easier path because we owe that to our predecessors. I am sanguine that the USI team will continue to work with its characteristic vigour not for personal gain but for the furtherance of knowledge in the spirit of the following *shloka* from the Bhagavad Gita:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥2.47॥

‘Thy right is to work only, but never with its fruits;
let not the fruits of action be thy motive, nor let thy attachment be
to inaction’

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