

## **National Security Reforms: Ten Years After the Kargil Committee Report\***

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### **Introduction**

I start by thanking the Director United Service Institution for having invited me to deliver the 2012 National Security Lecture. It is, indeed, a privilege for me to take the podium at this highly respected institution and address such a distinguished gathering.

When I was invited to deliver this talk, exactly a year ago, I was in the midst of an intense examination of the national security system, as part of the Naresh Chandra Committee. At that point of time, in spite of my earlier experience with the 2001 National Security Task Force, I still retained a degree of optimism; and expected that a year down the line I would be describing to this audience, substantive, if not dramatic, changes in the national security arena.

But here I am, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2012, to share your disappointment that, but for a few inconsequential changes, India's national security system remains, essentially, what we inherited at Independence, 65 years ago. The question why we, as a sovereign, independent nation, have failed to bring about reform in something as crucial to our existence as national security, has no simple answers. The impediments to change arise from sources within and without the system. These sources have remained steadfast in their opposition to change and have been instrumental in the

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\*Text of the talk by **Admiral Arun Prakash PVSM, AVSM, VrC, VSM (Retd)**, former Chief of the Naval Staff delivered at USI on 05 Dec 2012 with **Lieutenant General NC Marwah, PVSM, AVSM, Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC) and President USI Council** in the Chair.

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maintenance of status quo over the decade since the Kargil Review Committee rendered its report.

Those who favour status quo argue that the present system has worked well, and that there is no need to tinker with it. This is a deeply flawed approach because the system has not worked well, and we are fortunate to have muddled through in crisis after crisis. This approach may have served the purpose as long as national security was not an electoral issue. Today, the urban Indian is acutely aware of his personal vulnerability to violence emanating from various sources. He senses that something must be seriously amiss, if an annual defence expenditure approaching Rupees two lakh crores cannot buy him security. This is likely to become an issue in the next general election, and the politician needs to take note.

It is also obvious that India's strategic environment is steadily deteriorating. Threats to the nation's security, both internal and external, are far more serious than at any time in the past. The impending US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the growing truculence of China is likely to generate a new range of threats to India's security, ranging from resurgent proxy-wars to coercion and intimidation by a Sino-Pak nexus. The reassurance that we derive from our powerful conventional forces, our nuclear deterrent or even a missile shield may be illusory because we have failed to put in place, an effective national security structure for their management.

During the course of the next hour or so, I will explore issues relating to national security reform; but in order to construct a cohesive narrative, I need to delve briefly into history – some of which may be familiar to you. But please bear with me as I progressively approach the crux of the problem.

### **The Historical Backdrop**

We have recently observed the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Indian army's disastrous encounter with the People's Liberation Army on the icy Himalayan heights in 1962. This military fiasco was merely one manifestation of independent India's inept approach to national security issues, which has repeatedly jeopardised the nation's safety due to deficit political vision and a lack of coherence in policies.



The most recent example of this ineptitude was the 26/11 terrorist assault on Mumbai, when the nation, gripped by trauma and humiliation, was further confused to hear a senior member of the Cabinet making a public pronouncement: *"War is not an option."* Nobody wanted war, but the question in everyone's mind was: *"Are we not responding to such a grave provocation by choice? Or is it that we are incapable of responding?"* This was seven years after India had mobilised over a million men under arms in response to a terrorist attack on Parliament; only to de-mobilise them, eleven months later, with nothing to show for it except 900 soldiers killed or maimed in accidents.

Harking back to the Kargil conflict of 1999; it had brought us face to face with loss of vital territory, nuclear blackmail and possible national dishonour. This grave situation could only be retrieved by the deployment of overwhelming military force, and the selfless gallantry of our young jawans and officers. The degree of alarm created by Kargil was enough for the Government of India (GoI) to constitute an expert committee to undertake an urgent review of measures necessary to safeguard national security. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) probed deeply into many areas of weakness in our system and was scathing in its indictments. A telling comment is relevant here:

*"India is perhaps the only major democracy where the Armed Forces Headquarters are outside the apex governmental structure. ....what we need is a National Defence HQ. Most opposition to change comes from inadequate knowledge of the national security decision making process elsewhere in the world...and a reluctance to move away from considerations of parochial interest. The status quo is often mistakenly defended as embodying civilian ascendancy over the armed forces, which is not the real issue. In fact, locating the service HQs in the Government will further enhance civilian supremacy."*

I will revert to Kargil in a few moments, but before that let me delve a little deeper into history to identify the roots of this prejudice against the armed forces.

### **A Prejudiced Polity**

Certain mind-sets, from the pre-1947 era, coupled with a misinterpretation of Mahatma Gandhi's unique vision, led to the

emergence of two false perceptions in the minds of India's political leadership. For one, they were convinced that since a pacifist India would have no enemies, the armed forces would become redundant after independence. Their second conviction was that the Indian army was a mercenary force which had been used as a tool by the British to suppress the freedom movement, and deserved to be sidelined.

The first illusion was shattered just six weeks after Independence, when Pakistani hordes, supported by their army, came pouring into the state of J&K which had recently acceded to India. The Indian armed forces did the best they could, under difficult conditions, and would have, eventually, evicted the invaders from the state; had India not gone to the United Nations and accepted a cease-fire.

The politicians were right that the British Indian army had served the King-Emperor loyally in many wars, in India and abroad. But after the string of early British defeats in WW II, Indian prisoners of war (PWs) in Singapore, Germany and Italy were confronted with a moral dilemma of awesome proportions. They were given a choice between the oath they had sworn to a foreign ruler, and the chance to fight for freedom of their motherland, being offered by Netaji Subhash Bose.

After agonising over this quandary, and fully recognising the moral and military consequences of either option, many Indian officers and jawans decided for their motherland. Consequently, 3000 Indian PWs were formed into the Free Indian Legion raised as a unit of the German *Wehrmacht*, and 40,000 PWs in Singapore joined the *Azad Hind Fauj* or Indian National Army (INA) as it was commonly known.

The story of these expatriate Indian warriors is a romantic but forgotten chapter in India's freedom struggle. Suffice to say that the *Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind* (Provisional Government of Free India) formed in Singapore by Bose in 1943, formally, declared war on the British Empire, and INA units fought alongside the Japanese 15<sup>th</sup> Army in its abortive invasion of India.

In early 1946, politically-conscious, sailors of the Royal Indian Navy mutinied, and the insurrection spread right across the country, with units of the Army's Signal Corps, the EME and Royal Indian Air Force joining their naval comrades in revolt. These events not



only inspired and galvanised the freedom movement in India, but also struck deep fear into British hearts. General Wavell, C-in-C India, admitted in a secret report: *"It is no use shutting one's eye to the fact that any Indian soldier worth his salt is a Nationalist..."*

Disciplined Services never dwell on mutinies, regardless of the cause, and that is why these events rarely find mention in our armed forces. The powerful impact of these acts of great moral courage, on the freedom movement, must not be disparaged or belittled. The phase immediately post-Independence too, was extremely difficult for our fledgling republic. To forget the sterling role played by the armed forces during the violence and turbulence of partition, and in integrating the recalcitrant princely states would be an act of ingratitude.

Over the years, as our glaring strategic naiveté repeatedly led to adventurism by our neighbours in 1947, 1962, 1965, and 1999, it was invariably the gallantry and patriotism of the armed forces which saved the nation from disintegration and dishonour. The victory of Indian arms in the 1971 Bangladesh War will remain a glorious episode in the dismal history of sub-continental conflicts.

This foray into the past was meant to dispel prevailing myths, and to bring home the crucial contribution of the armed forces to India's freedom movement and the post-independence stabilisation phase. Since then, the armed forces have remained the most steadfast and patriotic upholders of India's democracy, secularism and integrity. Let us, then, see how independent India's leadership dealt with the re-organisation of India's higher defence management.

### **Lord Ismay's Solution**

In 1947, it so happened that two of the most experienced Allied military leaders, Lord Mountbatten and his Chief of Staff, Lord Ismay were at hand in India. The Government of India promptly asked them to evolve a system of higher defence management, which would meet the emerging needs of the newly independent nation.

Ismay was deeply conscious of the fact that no radical measures could be contemplated at that delicate juncture, when the sub-continent was about to be partitioned, and the armed forces carved into two. He, therefore, came up with a solution which called for the least amount of turbulence and readjustment, and

would serve admirably for the interim, till a proper system could be devised to suit Indian conditions.

He recommended a pragmatic option, based on a C-in-C for the operational management and administration of each Service, and a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) for central coordination. The COSC was to be supported by a series of other committees to address details of coordination between the Services, and between the Services and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and, above all, to provide for quick decision-making with a minimum of red tape. The incorporation of civil servants as members of each of these committees was meant to eliminate the need for detailed scrutiny of their decisions by the MoD. It was also meant to sow the seeds of civil-military integration.

This interim system recommended by Lord Ismay was a simple and workable one, meant to evolve and change as per the needs of the young nation. His vision was that the three Service Headquarters (SHQ) would, with time and further experience, become individual Departments of the MoD, each under the charge of a junior minister, or merge completely with the Department of Defence (DoD) within the MoD.

### **Bureaucratic Intervention**

However, not only did this not happen, but within a short period of its implementation, the senior civil servants of that period intervened to completely distort the concept of "civilian supremacy" to give it their own interpretation of "bureaucratic control" over the armed forces. This was done by the simple expedient of designating the three SHQ as "Attached Offices" of the DoD.

The relatively inexperienced military leaders of that era were probably well out of its depth when pitted against the veteran ICS officers in South Block, and it is difficult to blame them for not opposing this development. The SHQ, in keeping with their status of Attached Offices, found that they were reduced to adjuncts of MoD, and also placed completely outside the Ministry, which they could approach only through the medium of files.

The Indian system of higher defence management has remained trapped in a time-war since independence, and thus become outdated and dysfunctional. While the armed forces grew



in strength and capabilities, neither the military nor the political systems found the time or inclination to consider changes, or bring about systemic reforms. Till the Kargil episode brought us to the brink of a military disaster.

### **Attempts at Defence Reform**

As I mentioned earlier, the findings of the Kargil Review Committee contained a severe critique of the national security system, and pointed out glaring deficiencies in our intelligence services, border management and higher defence organisation. It led to the formation of a Group of Ministers (GoM) to examine reforms in the national security system, which in turn, commissioned four Task Forces in April 2000, for the examination of different components of the system.

The Task Force (TF) on Management of Defence, headed by former Minister of State for Defence, Arun Singh, was charged with a critical examination of existing structures for management of defence. The dialogue and discussion within the TF was free and frank, but it soon became obvious that on many significant issues the members would take up entrenched positions which reflected organisational viewpoints.

After five months of deliberations, all four TFs submitted their reports to the GoM which, after quick processing, issued their consolidated recommendations on Reforming the National Security System in February 2001. In the context of Defence Management the report made the following salient recommendations :-

- (a) To remove the impression that they did not participate in policy formation and were outside the Government apex structure, SHQ be designated as "Integrated Headquarters" instead of Attached Offices.
- (b) To expedite decision making and enhance efficiency, financial and administrative powers be delegated to Service HQs and lower formations.
- (c) Since the COSC has not been effective in fulfilling its mandate, it should be strengthened by the addition of a CDS and a Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS).
- (d) The CDS would be a four-star officer from one of the three Services in rotation, and would function as the

permanent Chairman of the COSC. He would fulfill the following functions:-

- (i) Provide single point military advice to the Government.
- (ii) Administer the Strategic Forces.
- (iii) Enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process through intra and inter-Services prioritisation.
- (iv) Ensure the required "Jointness" in the armed forces.

The details relating to the precise role and function of the CDS and his relationship with the other key actors in the defence set-up, particularly the Service Chiefs would need to be worked out.

- (a) Two joint formations; the Strategic Forces Command and the Andaman & Nicobar Command were to be established, with their Commanders reporting to the CDS.

In addition to the above the GoM made numerous other recommendations in respect of restructuring of MoD, planning and budgeting, procurement procedures, DRDO and National Defence University etc.

### **Aftermath of the GoM Report**

There was a great deal of optimism in the Service HQs in mid-2001 because it seemed that the national security system was, about to be updated to cope with 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts. Unfortunately, narrow parochial agendas prevailed over larger national interests and the Government decided not to implement a majority of the big-ticket reforms. The appointment of a CDS was scuttled at the last moment and this, actually, ripped the heart out of the GoM recommendations. A golden opportunity was thus wasted!

However, many of the less important GoM recommendations were cleared for implementation, and by the end of 2001, some changes had been wrought in the realm of higher defence organisation. These included the creation of an Integrated Defence Staff (IDS), two new Integrated Commands, and devolution of financial and administrative powers to the SHQ and Commands. The IDS, under a VCDS, had originally been visualised to provide support to the CDS, and to function as his HQ. However since



there was neither a CDS nor a VCDS, the complicated title of "Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chiefs of Staff Committee", or CISC, was created for a 3-star officer to run the IDS.

At this juncture, the bureaucracy managed to persuade the political establishment that the recommendations of the GoM had been substantively implemented, and nothing more needed to be done. In fact, without the implementation of critical recommendations such as reform to the COSC system and genuine integration of SHQ with MoD, the labours of the GoM had, actually, been wasted.

Let me, now, touch upon a few of the serious flaws that the Government has consistently failed to address and which continue to afflict the national security system.

### **The Locus Standi of Service Chiefs**

This exclusion of the Service HQs from the apex structure of the GoI, and the reduction of their status to a subaltern entity has had many damaging repercussions. Consequently, the armed forces have accumulated a set of grievances, of which I will take up just two prominent ones here. First; that the status of the Service Chiefs, in the Warrant of Precedence (WoP), has seen a slow but steady decline, and secondly; the fact that every proposal from the SHQ, even at the Chiefs' level, is subjected to scrutiny and remarks at the lowest echelon of the MoD. Some might, rightly, point out that the WoP is merely an issue of ceremonial significance, but I mention it here as the symptom of a problem whose crux lies elsewhere.

We need to face the fact that in the current dispensation, the Service Chiefs, for all their pomp and circumstance, are actually non-entities. They are seen but rarely heard in corridors of South Block, because they have not been accorded a status nor granted any powers in the edifice of the Government. Most Service officers are unaware that conduct of business by the GoI is governed by two documents; the "GoI Allocation of Business Rules" (AoB Rules), and the "GoI Transaction of Business Rules" (ToB Rules). There is also a "Manual of Office Procedures" which provides necessary elaboration and explanations.

According to these documents, a Department is responsible for the formulation of policies of the Government, as well as their

execution, monitoring and review. A Department is normally under the charge of a Secretary who acts as the administrative head of the department and principal adviser of the Minister on all matters of policy within the Department. Where required, a Department may have under it executive agencies called 'Attached' and 'Subordinate Offices'. The three SHQ, originally designated "Attached Offices of the DoD", were recently re-designated as "Integrated HQs of MoD", but their status remains unchanged; and they are still placed in a position subordinate to the DoD.

Let me, now come to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Schedule of the Allocation of Business Rules. Since the Service Chiefs find no mention, anywhere, in these rules, the following responsibilities of the DoD are, obviously, assigned to the Defence Secretary:

*(a) Defence of India and every part thereof including preparation for defence and all such acts as may be conducive in times of war to its prosecution and after its termination to effective Demobilisation.*

*(b) The Armed Forces of the Union, namely, Army, Navy and Air Force.*

*(c) Integrated Headquarters of the Ministry of Defence comprising of Army Headquarters, Naval Headquarters, Air Headquarters and Defence Staff Headquarters.*

From this, it becomes clear that the professional heads of the three Services, charged with the command of the armed forces, and who actually plan and conduct operations in war and peace, are not recognised by these rules. There is no piece of legislation, today, in which their responsibilities and authority, other than disciplinary powers, finds mention.

The politician's attitude towards the Service Chiefs is, obviously, based on the fact that as per current rules they have no locus standi in the structure of the GoI. It is for this reason that even the Prime Minister has been heard to say that the Secretary DoD is the right person to represent the three Services in most forums. Should it, then, surprise anyone that the Raksha Mantri places total reliance for advice, decision-making and problem resolution, on MoD civil servants, who are designated functionaries as per the Business Rules, rather than on Chiefs, Vice-Chiefs or Principal Staff Officers who are not listed therein.



This anomalous arrangement also raises some interesting questions. For example; since the Service Chiefs find no mention in the Business Rules, what is their status and standing *vis-a-vis* the Secretary DoD who has been made responsible for the "*Defence of India and every part thereof*?" What is the standing of the Chiefs in relation to Secretaries who head the other three Departments of the MoD and take decisions which have a lasting impact on national security? Is there an incongruity in the fact that the Service Chiefs are in the Cabinet Secretary's pay-grade, but the organisations that they head are the responsibility of the Defence Secretary?

While the Chiefs may "propose" it is the Defence Secretary who is the designated principle adviser to the Minister and will "dispose" of all important matters. As we just saw, the SHQ are excluded from the apex structure and are to be only "associated" with the policy-formulation process. There is no better example of the harmful impact of this arrangement, on the management of defence, than the trivialisation of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and the reduction of its Chairman to a mere symbol.

### **Functioning of the Chiefs of Staff Committee**

Under the current rules; on retirement of the incumbent Chairman, the senior-most Chief is nominated to the post of Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee, and he presides over this body till his own retirement. This system has resulted in tenures of Chairmen varying between 30 days to twenty months, with hardly any incumbent approaching the two year mark.

The Chairman COSC happens to be a key functionary in the nuclear command chain, and his role will assume further criticality with the induction of weapon systems like the nuclear-powered submarine INS *Arihant* (which will go on patrol with nuclear-tipped missiles) and the Agni-V ICBM. Given the gravity and magnitude of his responsibilities, and the time required to familiarise with them, tenure less than two years for a Chairman COSC makes little sense.

Such are the demands of being the operational and administrative head of an armed force, that no Service Chief can devote more than a small fraction of his time to the responsibilities of Chairman COSC without neglecting his own Service. A prime

function of the Chairman COSC is to inculcate and implement the spirit of "Jointness" which comes through integration of doctrine, logistics and operations of the three armed forces. However, being merely "one amongst equals" in the COSC the Chairman's authority to enforce any decision of a substantive nature within the Committee remains severely circumscribed.

Experience of the past 65 years has demonstrated that a part-time, rotational Chairman, devoid of any authority over fellow members of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, is ineffective, and remains a symbolic entity.

### **Some Other Shortcomings**

It is as a consequence of these basic flaws in our defence management system that we suffer from a number of other debilities which continue to have a serious impact on national security.

Foremost amongst these is our reliance on imported weapon systems due to the dismal failure of the DRDO to attain any degree of self-reliance. This is attributable to the fact that the armed forces are neither adequately consulted nor permitted a say in DRDO programmes. This organisation is free to spend its budget on technologies, which often do not have a bearing on the capabilities urgently needed by today's armed forces.

The second damaging consequence of isolating the armed forces from the MoD is the interminable delays that bedevil the processing of cases; whether they relate to acquisition of hardware and ammunition or to infrastructure, force planning and manpower accretions. Each case emanating from the SHQ is required to be steered through multiple layers of bureaucracy, that exist in three departments of the MoD as well as its Finance Wing, and finally in the Ministry of Finance. Adherence to these processes has not only thwarted force modernisation, inspite of recent reforms, but also affected combat readiness

Finally, with budgets likely to dwindle, there is dire need for prioritising the requirements of weapon systems projected by the three Services, based on an objective evaluation of their relevance vis-à-vis the strategic scenario. In the current system, the generalist MoD civil-servants are neither qualified nor inclined to undertake studies regarding threat evaluation, net assessment or force-



planning; nor do they like to seek expert advice. As a consequence, we see one of the two approaches being adopted. Either, the wish-lists are cleared blindly or, the proposals are stalled indefinitely; more often the latter.

### **The Naresh Chandra Committee**

Let us, now, jump to mid-2011 when, out of the blue, without any crisis or emergency, the Cabinet decided to convene another committee, under the chairmanship of senior bureaucrat, Shri Naresh Chandra, to undertake a review of challenges to national security, and recommend measures that will improve our ability to deal with them. Coincidentally, I happened to be the only survivor of the 2001 task force who was also on this body. The work of the committee was farmed out to different sub-groups which undertook a detailed examination of specific areas and fed it into the main report which was submitted in end May 2012.

For obvious reasons I am not going to speak about the proceedings and recommendations of this committee. However, there has been considerable speculation in the media, and one topic that has been the subject of much ill-informed discussion is that of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and Theatre Commands. I will try to shed some light on this issue.

### **CDS and Theatre Commands**

Much of the media commentary espouses, not just the immediate installation of a CDS but also, a simultaneous switch to the system of "theatre commands" for conduct of military operations. The line of argument, adopted even by senior veterans, seems to be that if we cannot have a CDS, nothing else is worth having.

Given the prevailing political disinterest in security matters, such suggestions have the potential to create confusion, and could even frighten the Government into paralysis. It is obvious that these suggestions, though well-meant, are based on inadequate knowledge of the theatre command system in its authentic format. They also grossly under-estimate the distance that the Indian armed forces will need to traverse from their current WW II organisations and mind-sets, to attainment of the level of integration required to deploy a joint theatre command in combat.

A brief reference to the scheme followed by the USA - the

main practitioner of this system – may bring some clarity. The US legislators have ensured that the roles, missions, duties and organisation of the armed forces are unambiguously stipulated in the Code of Federal Laws. According to Title 10 of this Code, the DoD is headed by a cabinet minister designated Secretary of Defence, who is assisted by three junior ministers, one for each Service, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS); the rough equivalent of CDS. The CJCS is the designated principal military adviser to the President and the Secretary of Defence.

Theatre commands, known in the US as Unified Combatant Commands, are organised either on a geographical or a functional basis, and headed by a general or an admiral, whose operational chain of command runs through the Secretary of Defence to the President of the USA. They have a parallel linkage to the JCS. The Chief of Staff of a Service, on the other hand, is an administrative position, held by the senior-most uniformed officer in the Service, who bears no operational responsibility and reports to the minister in-charge of his Service.

Now compare this with the system followed by India. The three Service Chiefs have, since Independence, continued to wear two hats; a “staff hat” as the Chief of Staff and an “operational hat” as the Commander-in-Chief of his force. One of them also functions, part-time, as rotational Chairman COSC. Such anachronisms do not exist in any other modern military.

The US system covers the whole world with just nine Unified Combatant commands, manned by joint staffs, with integral components of the army, navy and air force at the disposal of the Commander. By way of contrast; the Indian system has, mindlessly, created 19 commands; of which 14 are geographic, three functional and only two are joint. Apart from the challenges that the Indian armed forces will face in converting 17 single Service commands, no two of which are headquartered in the same location, into three, four or five theatre commands, we must bear in mind two other important hurdles to theatre-command functioning. These are as under :-

- (a) Firstly; the scarcity of officers, especially at 2 or 3-star rank, with adequate background and experience to operationally command and deploy joint-forces. We have deluded ourselves that training together in the NDA or undergoing the tri-Service Staff Course is enough to inculcate



"jointness". In the USA it took two Acts of Congress (the 1947 National Security Act and the 1986 Nichols-Goldwater Act) and 50 years of experience to enforce jointness.

(b) Secondly; an equally difficult and challenging transition will be divestment of the Service Chiefs' operational functions and handing over control of army, navy and IAF combat formations to the 3-star theatre commanders, who may be from any of the three Services.

To summarise: both a CDS and theatre-commands are vital for the enforcement of "jointness" and synergistic operational deployment of India's 21<sup>st</sup> century armed forces. However, a change-over to this system will demand a drastic transformation, including rapid integration of the three Services, which cannot happen overnight and must be a calibrated process.

A practical half-way house would be the institution of a full-time or permanent 4-star Chairman COSC with a fixed tenure of two years, who would have no Service distractions. He would be empowered to exercise Veto over the three other members of the Committee. Supported by the CISC and IDS HQ, he could be tasked to prepare a 5-10 year roadmap for implementation of change-over to a CDS and theatre command system. For this measure to succeed, it must be accompanied by creation of joint-Service staffs at every level, and professionalisation of the MoD through the substantive induction of uniformed personnel.

At this stage let me pre-empt some of your questions, by explaining the impediments to change or reform of the national security structure, because it is quite likely that they may appear once again.

### **Impediments to Reform**

The deliberations of the Task Forces in 1999 had revealed that objections and impediments to changes or reform in the national security arena emerged, essentially, from three or four sources. From my vantage point as a member of both the bodies constituted for national security reform, I was struck by the consistency of mind-sets over a decade.

The main root of contention within the armed forces has been the strong opposition, to change, from the IAF leadership. This is,

possibly, engendered by the fear that many of its roles and assets are coveted by the army and the navy. The air force has always viewed, with deep suspicion, any proposal which would subject its force-accretion process to scrutiny, or place any of its forces under the command of the other two Services. It has thus stood firmly against all proposals related to inter-Service integration as well as the creation of a CDS and theatre commands.

Historically, the IAF apprehensions are well-founded; because the navy wrested control of Maritime Reconnaissance in 1976 and the army carved out Army Aviation, from the IAF, a decade later. Recently, a MoD caveat has assigned some proportion of combat helicopter aviation to army control. The Service is now, probably wondering if the tactical air-lift role is under threat. In all fairness, it must be acknowledged that the IAF has been repeatedly seeking a definition of aviation roles, missions and core-competencies; but somehow neither the COSC, nor the MoD has found the inclination to undertake such a discussion.

The IAF has also taken the stand that a CDS and theatre commands are pertinent only for nations contemplating expeditionary operations. This argument says that since the Indian armed forces are mandated only to defend national territory, these issues are irrelevant for India. It has also been the air force view that adequate inter-Service cooperation exists, and any attempts at enhancing Jointness should only follow the integration of the SHQ with the MoD.

This particular stance is difficult to reconcile with the IAF's newly acquired reach and punch, and its projection of itself as a "trans-oceanic" force which exercises regularly with counterparts across four continents. With a growing strength of long-range strike aircraft such as Su-30s, in-flight refueling capability and AWACS support, it counts amongst the most capable air forces world-wide. Its large C-17 and C-130 fleet will give it a strategic lift capability, which few countries can boast of. The IAF ambivalence about expeditionary operations is, therefore, difficult to understand.

The second source of resistance to change comes from the civil services. They feel seriously threatened by any thought of further autonomy for the SHQ, and by the creation of a CDS, since it would erode their influence and authority in the MoD. They have firmly maintained that the current status of the SHQ is quite



appropriate, because "civilian control" of the armed forces demands that decision-making must remain in the hands of civil-servants and not soldiers. Therefore, recognition of the Service Chiefs/Vice Chiefs by the Rules of business as GoI functionaries, or any further integration is considered neither necessary nor desirable.

Cross-posting of officers between the MoD and SHQ does not find favour with the bureaucracy because they are quite clear that no IAS officer should ever have to serve under a uniformed superior. A similar logic is used to argue that the Service officers deputed to MoD would either be sub-standard or not serve their civilian superiors "loyally". The creation of a specialised IAS cadre, to serve in appointments related to national security, does not find favour since it would limit the utility and career prospects of bright IAS officers. The consensus is clearly in favour of *status quo*.

A third and unexpected source of impediment has, lately, emerged from within the higher levels of the Services hierarchy for two reasons.

Firstly; since no Chief would like to preside over the divestment of his operational authority, and be reduced to the status of a planner, recruiter and supporter of theatre commanders, there have been second thoughts on the issue of CDS. Secondly; the army's attitude seems to have become lukewarm; and the reason offered is, that low intensity conflict and internal security commitments do not permit space for such concepts. All this has led to an overall dilution in the earlier enthusiasm for Jointness, and a clear manifestation is the visible erosion of support for the Andaman & Nicobar Command.

This brings me to the last and most significant factor relevant to reform in India's national security structure; the political establishment.

### **The Political Outlook**

The lack of adequate political involvement in national security issues, peculiar to India, is attributable to the high political stakes and sustained intensity of electoral politics of its evolving democracy. In spite of a deep-rooted urge to emphasise the principle of civil control over the armed forces, the Indian politician has never found the time or capacity to define national aims and objectives, issue strategic guidance or initiate defence white papers.

Due to this attention-deficit, many national security issues of vital importance have remained in limbo for decades; national security reform being one of them.

In order to create the time and capacity to devote to activities relating to constituency, party, Parliament and, of course, political survival, the politician has found it expedient to let the bureaucracy handle, what they see as, complex, tedious and time-consuming matters relating to national security. Not only is the politician's comfort-level with the civilian bureaucracy higher, he is also relying on functionaries clearly allotted responsibility by the Rules of Business. Notwithstanding these factors, the delegation of "civilian control" to the bureaucracy, while excluding the armed forces from defence policy and decision-making, goes against universal norms and reflects an unwarranted lack of faith in the military leadership.

As far as national security reforms are concerned, there is no doubt that it is only the political establishment which has the influence and clout to push through an agenda for change. However, it is also obvious that two sets of factors tend to play on the politician's mind.

On one hand, he is intuitively aware that there are serious flaws in the national security structure, and these apprehensions have been substantiated by successive reports of Parliamentary Standing Committees on Defence. He must be also aware that the best means of exercising civil authority over the armed forces is to subsume them within the edifice of the GoI.

At the same time, his worst fears about the threat from praetorian armed forces are being continuously kept alive by various interested parties. It is a sad commentary on the brittleness of India's democracy that, 65 years after independence, a trust-deficit, bordering on suspicion, appears to persist between the political elite and the armed forces; in spite of every evidence to the contrary. The unsavoury and unprincipled ambush of the armed forces by a sensational front-page report in the Indian Express of 4<sup>th</sup> April 2012 was an example of this. But such journalistic absurdity could not have found traction in the political establishment without support from the bureaucracy and the intelligence community.

It is for these reasons that politicians have, conveniently, used the contrarian arguments and alarmist apprehensions



emerging from various quarters to postpone reforms that seek to enhance the cohesion, jointness or unity of command of the armed forces - or indeed free them from bureaucratic strangleholds. Apart from the negative contribution of various external entities, we must not forget that the conflicts and contradictions from within the armed forces have been used by the politician to justify inaction.

## Conclusion

India's political establishment has chosen to follow an unusual paradigm in which policy-making is assigned to the bureaucracy, while strategy is crafted by diplomats, and matters impinging on grand strategy, like nuclear deterrence or ballistic missile defence, remain in the hands of scientists and technocrats. Uniquely amongst major powers, India has not seen it fit to entrust its armed forces with any role in national security decision-making. To quote the American analyst George Tanham in this context: *"India has pursued the policy of civilian control to a point where the military have almost no input at all in the formulation of higher defence policy and national strategy."*

Persisting with such a policy conveys an ostrich-like approach, and the hope that if we maintain status quo, all our problems and adversaries will just melt away. Quite the contrary, India's bitter experience of the past has demonstrated that lack of resolve in security matters has only tempted others to repeatedly infringe our sovereignty. The fact is, that national security reforms are vital, not just because they are long overdue, but because our security environment is steadily worsening. Urgent steps are needed to enhance the efficiency and combat effectiveness of the armed forces; only then would our huge defence expenditure have proved cost-effective.

Fierce opposition to reforms, both from the armed forces as well as the bureaucracy is a known phenomenon world-wide, mainly because each sees itself as being a loser in some manner or the other. It is for this reason that, historically, defence reforms in all major democracies have had to be imposed by the political establishment. In a democracy like the USA, Representatives and Senators, deeply concerned about national security, have gone to great lengths to ensure that systemic reforms are legislated as laws through Acts of Congress.

This may, perhaps, be our last chance to "fix" a national security system that is archaic and borders on the dysfunctional, before it is too late. The Naresh Chandra Committee report, submitted six months ago, could be a good starting point for change, but past experience has demonstrated the ease with which it is possible for reports of this nature to be shelved and cast into limbo. Of all the issues that seem to engage the time and attention of our Parliamentarians, none can be as critical as national security, simply because it impinges on the nation's very existence. It is, therefore, time for our law-makers to shed their indifference and to intervene strongly to ensure that long overdue reforms in this arena are implemented.