



Civil–military Dissonance: The Bane of India’s National Security

Admiral Arun Prakash (Retd)*

The civil–military equation has been assigned great significance in the national security matrix, and experts consider that nations that fail to evolve a stable paradigm of civil–military relations squander their resources and run grave security risks. In India, this issue has failed to receive the importance it deserves because of the general indifference of the politicians to national security affairs on one hand, and the vested interest of the bureaucracy in maintaining the status quo on the other. It is believed that civil–military relations constitute a zero-sum game in which “civilian control” is retained by reducing the power of the military vis-à-vis the civilians. An irrational but subliminal fear of the military has led the Indian politicians to skew the civil–military equation in favour of the bureaucracy and, in a paradigm unique to India, to place the military under their control. Pointing to the military’s sense of grievance and the vitiated atmosphere that prevails in the Ministry of Defence, the author reflects on the price being paid by the nation for endemic “civil–military dissonance” in terms of major national-security shortcomings, as well as the damage being inflicted on the institution of our armed forces.

*Former CNS and Chairman, NMF. The views expressed in this article are author’s own and the foundation may not in any way subscribe to the same.

Politicians enjoy power without any responsibility, bureaucrats wield authority without any accountability and the military assumes responsibility without any direction.

K. Subrahmanyam

Introduction

In a world of startling change, the first duty of the Government remains: the security of our country.

These are the opening lines of the foreword to the 2010 UK National Security Strategy signed by PM David Cameron and his (coalition) Deputy PM, Nick Clegg. The foreword goes on to add,

The task of protecting our security is never complete and in an age of uncertainty we must remain vigilant, regularly taking stock of the changing threats we face. So we will report annually to Parliament on the National Security Strategy, and we will require a new Strategic Defence and Security Review every five years.¹

In the 67 years of independence, neither the Government of India (GoI) nor Parliament has considered it necessary that a defence white paper, a national security doctrine or strategy be issued. Nor has a strategic defence review ever been undertaken or even a statement of national interests and objectives formally enunciated. Some feel that this profound reticence and unconcern about national security is rooted in India's overarching posture of "strategic restraint". While this may have been an adequate strategy when India's aspirations were circumscribed by its limited means, a growing economy has steadily boosted India's defence expenditure (US\$ 37.4 billion for 2013–14²) and considerably augmented its military capabilities. The world, therefore, sees it as a rising power and a strategically significant entity.

In this context, India's stance in the international arena seems to be influenced by more than a touch of schizophrenia. This syndrome becomes apparent in the ability of its political leadership to reconcile two contradictory sentiments. One is a powerful sense of hubris, based on its ancient cultural heritage, which drives India to occupy moral high ground and claim an exalted position in the global pecking order, as a right. The other is a minimalist posture; manifesting itself in doctrinal barrenness,

strategic timidity and self-imposed constraint in policies, even where the nation's vital interests are concerned.

India's political leadership, in an egregious display of indifference, has distanced itself from national security issues. At the same time, baseless but paranoid suspicion of praetorian intent has led it to exclude India's armed forces from a role in national security decision making. Thus, in a unique paradigm, Indian politicians have chosen to farm-out policy making to bureaucrats, while strategy is crafted by diplomats, and decisions at the grand-strategic level, such as nuclear deterrence or ballistic-missile defence are taken on the exclusive advice of scientists and technocrats.

The net result is a strange conundrum in which India has collected the trappings of power – a nuclear arsenal as well as one of the world's largest militaries – without its decision makers having a real idea of how to leverage them for political ends. Further evidence of strategic naiveté is to be found in the decision of India's political establishment to place the armed forces under the comprehensive control of a 100% civilian bureaucracy. Notwithstanding its dubious expertise in defence and security domains, the bureaucracy has also been assigned responsibility for national defence by the GoI mandate.

India's politico-bureaucratic elite seems oblivious of the fact that anomalies such as these have created an archaic and sub-optimal national-security structure, which may not be capable of coping with 21st-century threats. An equally damaging fall-out has been a steady deterioration in the civil–military relationship due to a deliberately contrived asymmetry. Steady reinforcement of this asymmetry – in favour of the bureaucracy – by successive governments has served to enhance the prevalent suspicion and disharmony between the civilian Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the uniformed Service Headquarters (SHQ). A clear indicator of this is the fact that while the military seethes with dissatisfaction, the political establishment and civilian bureaucracy appear quite content and remain staunch upholders of the *status quo*.

The civil–military equation is a complex dynamic, which has roots not only in political science and sociology but also in many other fields including history, philosophy and psychology etc. This article is a modest attempt to examine a few of these factors in order to obtain a better understanding of the nature of civil–military relations in India, including its flaws, and to identify the consequences of the existing dissonance. Some options and recommendations, in this regard, have also been offered for consideration.

The crux of civil–military relations lies in the concept of “civilian control”, which needs to be addressed at the outset.

The Concept of Civilian Control

Blurring the Civil/Military Lines

National security, in the larger context, denotes the ability of a state to withstand military threats and political coercion, to ensure its survival and safeguard its interests and ideals. The original notion of “national security”, born in post-Second World War USA, had focused, largely on the kinetic aspects and use of military force in the belief that “if you want peace, you must prepare for war”. Today, however, the concept has been expanded to encompass economic, diplomatic, political and even environmental factors.

The concept of mobilizing a whole nation to participate in a conflict was first practiced during the French Revolutionary Wars using the “*levee en masse*”. This term denoted a temporary requisitioning of all able-bodied men to defend the nation, and was a manifestation of the idea that the new political rights given to the people also created new obligations to the state. Since France visualised itself as an egalitarian community of all people, its defence, also, was assumed to have become a responsibility of all citizens of the Republic.

Lt Gen Rupert Smith credits Napoleon with creating the paradigm of, what he terms as, “inter-state industrial wars”,³ in which the pursuit of victory demanded that society be mobilized and dedicated totally to supporting the war. Consequently, a belligerent’s social structure, including the civilian population, industry and economy, became viable military targets. The two Great Wars of the 20th century saw the battlefield being extended to cover every corner of the belligerents’ homelands and making their people legitimate targets for attack. The strategic bombing of Germany and Japan by the Allies, and finally, the dropping of atomic bombs by the USA on Hiroshima and Nagasaki erased the line between combatants and civilians in modern warfare.

Conflicts since 1945 have been characterized by the “will of the people” itself being made a target, and military force no longer remaining the decisive element in a conflict. Wars, instead of being fought between armies on a battlefield, are now fought, “amongst the people”, because civilians have become as much “targets to be attacked” or “objectives to be won” as any military force.⁴

Acquiring an insight into the nature of war, understanding the compulsions of national security and evolving strategies for achieving security objectives has become the *sine qua non* of the security establishments of major powers. In this endeavour, the distinction between “civil” and “military” components of the security establishment has become blurred. Post-Second World War experience has, in fact, shown that the evolution of nuclear and other strategies owes more to civilian scholars in academia and analysts in think tanks than to military institutions.

Contours of Civil–military Relationship

The civil–military relationship has, in fact, come to form the keystone of national security. According to social scientist Samuel Huntington, in his classic work *The Soldier and the State*, military institutions are shaped equally by a “functional imperative” of countering threats to national security and a “societal imperative” arising from the forces and ideologies within society. He urges extensive debate and application of mind to the ordering of civil–military relations, which would call for a “complex balancing of power and attitudes” amongst civilian and military groups, and warns that “Nations which fail to develop a balanced pattern of civil–military relations squander their resources and run uncalculated risks.”⁵

Huntington has undertaken an in-depth examination of the military’s role in society. Subjecting the evolution civil–military relations to a historical analysis, he tests his hypotheses in the context of “militaristic” powers like Germany and Japan, before evolving a general theory of civil–military relations, which has direct relevance to the demands of US military security and American values of liberalism.

As far as contemporary India is concerned, since most of its institutions – civil as well as military – are inchoate, and the military’s role remains indeterminate, only a small part of Huntington’s discourse is applicable to this country. However, as India gathers the economic and military trappings of power, and matures politically, it will have much to learn from Huntington. For a start, it is illuminating to examine his attempt to find a satisfactory definition of the much-used term “civilian control”.

Defining “Civilian Control”

Huntington starts with the hypothesis that the concept of “civilian control” is based on the relative power of civilian and military groups and that the key to establishing civilian control is to minimize military power *vis-à-vis* civilian power. Given the large

number, varied character and conflicting interests of civilian groups, it is impossible to maximize civil power as a whole, and to minimize the military's power without denuding its effectiveness. In response to the inevitable question: which civilians are to do the controlling, Huntington considers two alternative models.⁶

In "subjective civilian control", the specific interests of a particular civilian group are advanced by a military that lacks a professional officer corps. As examples, he points to 17th-century England, which witnessed a struggle between the Crown and Parliament for control of the military, and present day USA, which sees continuous sparring between Congress and the President for influence over the armed forces. The opposite, "objective civilian control", is defined as that distribution of *political power* (emphasis mine) between the military and civilian groups that is most conducive to professionalization of the officer corps. Whereas subjective control achieves its ends by civilianizing the military, objective control seeks to militarize the military, making them tools of the state. Military participation in politics is, therefore, the antithesis of objective control.⁷

Whether or not Huntington's detailed study has current relevance to India, we need to take note of his dual prescription for minimization of military power and retention of civil control: (a) professionalize the military and (b) render them politically neutral and sterile.⁸

Elsewhere in the world, the pursuit of war has demanded equal attention from soldiers as well as statesmen, diplomats and bureaucrats. This has not been the case in India, because for two centuries preceding 1947, wars were fought by Indian armies, at home and abroad, on behalf of their British colonial masters; and Indians had no involvement in imperial planning or strategies. Little has changed even after six decades of independence, because we remain tentative and unsure about the use of military power. This rhetorical question posed by India's National Security Adviser, Shiv Shankar Menon sums up the situation:

Is there an Indian doctrine for the use of force in statecraft? This is not a question that one normally expects to ask about a power that is a declared nuclear weapon state ... But India ... has displayed both ambiguity and opposition to classical power politics.⁹

We, therefore, have no choice but to seek wisdom from Prussian strategist and theorist, the old warhorse, Carl von Clausewitz.

The Political Nature of War

The Statesman and The Commander

In his treatise *On War*, Clausewitz goes to great lengths to emphasize the political character of war. Amidst his comprehensive treatment of numerous issues related to war, Clausewitz writes with deep insight about the relationship between the statesman and the military commander. Elaborating on the repetitive theme that war is “an instrument of policy”, and a “branch of political activity”, Clausewitz declares, “War does not have its own logic and purpose. The soldier must always be subordinate to the statesman; the conduct of war is the responsibility of the latter ...”¹⁰

He advises that while the commander-in-chief must be in the war cabinet to keep the politicians informed, he is there to take orders, not give them. It is the responsibility of politicians to ensure that the military means they adopt are appropriate to their political ends. Speaking of the attributes of a good Minister of War, he says, “What is needed in the post is intellect and strength of character. The minister can always get the necessary military information and advice”.¹¹ In the same breath he strongly urges upon the statesman and policy-maker that, “... a certain grasp of military affairs is vital for those in charge of policy”.¹²

In the present discussion, it is essential to take note of Clausewitz’s insistence on the need for the “statesman” to maintain an open and continuous dialogue with the “commander”, especially when there is possibility of conflict. However, since the occurrence of military conflict is relatively rare, unless the statesman and soldier make a habit of engaging in dialogues of this nature during peacetime, it will not happen when required.

Clausewitz in the Indian Milieu

While attempting to transpose Clausewitzian dictums to the Indian milieu, we must make allowances for certain peculiarities. The Indian politician, in spite of his strident emphasis on the principle of civil control, keeps his distance from the military and delegates the responsibility for security related matters to civil servants or technocrats. As the politician does not always involve himself in policy-making, “civil authority”, for the purposes of this discussion, may be represented by a duality or even trinity consisting of a combination of the politician, bureaucrat and scientist, who are said to form India’s “national security elite”.

Given the political origins and nature of war, it becomes obvious that any dividing lines between the civil and military components of national security are most undesirable. Yet that is exactly the malady that afflicts India's higher defence organization. The politician employs a MoD, staffed exclusively by civilians, to exercise control over the armed forces headquarters that are external and subordinate to it. The current system has been not only been allowed to persist since independence, but is stoutly defended on the grounds that since it has worked for 67 years, there is no need to make changes.

It is unlikely that either Huntington or Clausewitz is read, much less followed, by the national security elite in New Delhi. Nevertheless, let us examine the situation prevalent on Raisina Hill and, specifically in South Block, in the light of all that has been discussed.

The Wages of Suspicion

Two major factors have contributed to systemic flaws whose effects manifest themselves, periodically, in times of security crises. Mention has already been made of the politician's detachment from national security matters, because of his intuition that this is not a vote-catching issue, and his near exclusive focus on political agendas. A second factor is the total reliance that the politician places, for advice, decision making and problem resolution, on the non-specialist bureaucracy, despite the Service Chiefs and the SHQ staff being available for professional advice on the full range of defence and security related issues.¹³

This stubborn adherence to a unique and archaic system extracts a heavy price, in many ways, and the nation certainly does not receive commensurate return from its investment in defence. In the succeeding paragraphs, I cover some of the more glaring anomalies in the system that I have dealt with extensively in other writings.¹⁴

The "Invisible" Service Chiefs

The counsel of three Service Chiefs, in matters of policy, is sought infrequently and when offered often goes unheeded because they have neither been accorded recognition nor granted any powers in the edifice of the GoI. Proof of this is to be found in the "Government of India Allocation of Business Rules" (AoB Rules) and the "Government of India Transaction of Business Rules" (ToB Rules) – the "bibles" that guide the conduct of the GoI.¹⁵

According to the Business Rules, the MoD comprises four Departments, namely Defence (DoD), Defence Production & Supply (DDP&S), Defence Research & Development (DDR&D), and Ex-Servicemen Welfare (DESW), and the Finance Division. The three armed forces HQs have been placed subordinate to the DoD as “Attached Offices”. This arrangement has been in place since independence, and its inception as well as continuance for over six decades has become a deliberate policy tool, for “management” of the armed forces, with full political approval.

As a consequence of recommendations of the 2001 Group of Ministers Report, the AoB Rules were, indeed, amended to re-designate the three Service HQs as “Integrated HQs of Army/Navy/Air Force”. This superficial change was, however, a politico-bureaucratic subterfuge, meant for public consumption, as no integration had actually taken place and the equation between SHQ and MoD had not changed.

This is confirmed by the fact that, even after amendment of the Business Rules, the three Service Chiefs found no mention therein. Ironically, the 2nd Schedule of the AoB Rules allocates responsibilities to the DoD for: (a) “defence of India, and every part thereof, including preparation for its defence and all such acts as may be conducive in times of war to its prosecution” (b) “the Armed Forces of the Union, namely, Army, Navy and Air Force”, and (c) “the Integrated Headquarters of the MoD comprising of AHQ, NHQ, Air HQ and Defence Staff Headquarters”.

A serious dichotomy arises from the fact that the Service Chiefs, apart from being heads of their respective staffs, are also the operational commanders of India’s land, naval and air forces. As such, they bear full responsibility for planning of war and for the deployment of the army, naval and air forces in wartime as well as peacetime operations. In this context, the current arrangement raises some intriguing questions, which have remained unaddressed for over six decades:

- The Business Rules allocate responsibility for the “defence of India” to the DoD, while ignoring the Service Chiefs. Under these circumstances, what is the relationship between the Secretary DoD and the Chiefs? Who should be held accountable for failures and shortcomings in areas of military planning, procurement and operations?
- What is the standing of the Chiefs in relation to Secretaries who head the other three Departments of the MoD and take decisions with a critical impact on the combat readiness of their forces without consulting them?

- Is there an anomaly in the fact that the Service Chiefs are, notionally, on par with the Cabinet Secretary, and yet the organizations that they head are designated as Attached Offices of the DoD?

It is the disempowerment of the Services that seems to have set the overall tone for civil–military relations in the government. With a few exceptions, successive Prime Ministers and Defence Ministers have taken their cue from the Rules of Business and relied for advice and guidance on the bureaucracy rather than the Chiefs. They have, thus, not just reinforced the alienation of the armed forces but also deprived themselves of sound professional counsel.

As a direct consequence of the exclusion of the armed forces from the decision-making process and the consequent civil–military divide, we suffer from significant debilities that continue to have a serious impact on national security.

A Half-empty Arsenal

Foremost amongst these is our failure to attain self-reliance in production of weapon systems and the heavy price that we pay for dependence on external sources. Not only does the cost of imported systems, spare parts and ammunition keep escalating at exorbitant rates but even their availability remains unreliable and unpredictable; thereby eroding combat readiness.

The root of this debility lies in the subordinate status accorded to Service HQs by the Rules of Business. Accordingly, the DRDO does not consider it necessary or appropriate to consult the SHQ while formulating their R&D programmes, which are supposed to deliver technology-based capability to the armed forces. The DRDO's autonomy enables it to decide its own priorities and to expend research effort and funds in areas that often do not have priority for the armed forces. Since the user has no say and the bureaucracy does not know enough, the DRDO does what it pleases. India, consequently, remains the top importer of weapon systems worldwide. In stark contrast, China (and even Pakistan) count amongst major arms-exporting nations.

Similarly, the vast public sector defence production complex, under the supervision of an uninformed but authoritarian bureaucracy, has succeeded in misleading the nation with spurious claims of “indigenous production” and “transfer-of-technology”, whereas all they have really undertaken is assembly of kits and licensed production.

Had the armed forces been permitted a greater say in the functioning of DRDO as well as defence production units, far more could have been achieved in terms of efficiency, innovation and self-reliance over the past six decades.

Lagging Modernization

The second damaging consequence of the sequestration of the armed forces from the GoI is the interminable delays that bedevil the processing of cases, whether they relate to hardware acquisition or to infrastructure and manpower accretions. Each case emanating from the SHQ is required to be steered through multiple layers of bureaucracy that exist in four departments of the MoD as well as its Finance Division and finally in the Ministry of Finance.

Queries are sequential, repetitive and often raised to prevaricate, and every file movement takes weeks, if not months. Adherence to these processes has not only thwarted force modernization, in spite of recent reforms in procurement procedures, but also affected combat readiness.

Were the SHQ to be brought into the MoD and functionally integrated with it, all the expertise would be available under one roof, thus eliminating the need for queries on file. Moreover, collegiate discussions could take place around a table and decisions then recorded on file.

An Un-informed MoD

With budgets likely to dwindle, in real terms, there is a dire need for prioritizing the requirements of weapon systems and other hardware projected by the Services, so that funds can be channelized in the right direction at the right time.

This prioritization has to be based on an objective evaluation of the need and relevance for a capability projected by a Service, against the prevailing threat scenario. The proposal for acquisition of a capability must not only be justified by the sponsoring Service, it must also stand in the face of competing claims from other Services. Military modernisation, especially in an era of financial stringency, must be viewed as a continuum in which hardware acquisition choices are exercised across the full spectrum of land, maritime and aerospace warfare capabilities, rather than as decisions taken to meet the aspirations or enhance the prestige of one Service or the other.

In the current set-up, generalist civil servants lack the necessary experience/expertise regarding military force planning and architecture to examine critically the validity of many weapon systems demanded by the Services. Lacking a collegiate system of consultation with the armed forces, the preferred solution for the bureaucracy is to stall the case, and delays ranging from 5 to 25 years are not unknown.

This essay would remain deficient if it failed to take note of recent events, not too far back in time, which are a direct manifestation of India's civil-military discord and have served to damage the institution of the armed forces.

Damage to the Military Institution

The first intimations of a serious civil-military schism, in recent times, came dramatically into the public domain in 1998. A difference of opinion between a Service Chief and the Raksha Mantri (RM) snowballed rapidly into a confrontation, resulting in the unprecedented dismissal of the Navy Chief. The years 2011 and 2012, too, were notable for the huge predicaments faced by the MoD, and the trauma and damage inflicted, both on the military and on the larger national security establishment.

Two controversies that erupted during 2011-12 demonstrated, yet again, the sheer incapability of the politico-bureaucratic establishment to cope with crises of this nature. In the first instance, the serving Army Chief, obsessed with a personal grievance, and having failed to receive satisfaction from MoD, took the remarkable step of seeking redress from the Supreme Court. To the deep embarrassment of the military and a concerned public many unsavoury details of the case were leaked to the media (allegedly from MoD sources) to be dissected in newspapers articles and TV studios.

While all this was going on, the armed forces were suddenly "ambushed" by a prominent newspaper editor who splashed a report in banner headlines declaring that the government had been "spooked" by intelligence reports of troop movements towards Delhi. The barely disguised innuendo was that an incipient *coup d'état* by a disgruntled Army Chief had been uncovered. The main source of public concern arose from the suspicion that the media could not have dared to concoct a canard with such serious implications without a nod from the politico-bureaucratic establishment and inputs from intelligence agencies.

Yet another crisis, involving the navy, began to take shape towards mid-2013 with a serious accident on board a submarine with heavy loss of life. In an unfortunate happenstance, this was followed by a succession of incidents/accidents, mostly of a trivial nature, which often occur in all operational navies. While there was no common thread running through them, the intrusive and ill-informed Indian media raised a storm of vitriolic criticism against the navy, projecting each incident as a disaster of Titanic proportions. This sustained, and somewhat hysterical, media blitz, seen by many as inspired or motivated, seemed to have driven an already despondent Naval Chief to submitting his resignation, on grounds of moral responsibility.

The haste with which the resignation was accepted by the government clearly spoke of relief in the MoD that a sacrificial lamb had presented itself. A few months earlier, the RM had delivered a rebuke to the navy for the accidents, accusing it of “frittering national resources”, little realizing the irony of his statement. By publically criticizing NHQ, which was theoretically an “Integrated HQ of MoD”, he was actually castigating himself. He also did not seem to realize that he was referring to a serious and perplexing mishap (in which 18 submariners had lost their lives) and that his indictment was not only premature but also not founded on any facts available then.

The Chief’s resignation and its ready acceptance spoke volumes of the huge chasm between the military and the politico-bureaucratic establishment. It was also a commentary on the moral pusillanimity of the latter. Had the government ensured full and proper integration of NHQ with the MoD, the responsibility for these accidents would have devolved collectively on the ministry’s shoulders, and a proactive RM could have authoritatively deflected unfair media criticism of the navy. Clearly, it would then not have been necessary to accept the Navy Chief’s resignation.

Tragedy was thereafter followed by farce. In a demonstration of the complete indifference of India’s political establishment towards crucial national security issues, the navy’s top post was allowed to lie vacant for 50 days before a new Chief’s name was announced. This huge hiatus occurred in spite of clearly laid down guidelines and qualified candidates being available for selection of a successor. All this while, the MoD did nothing to counter media speculation about a “line of succession” and other salacious innuendoes, which are bound to have damaged the armed forces and sapped morale.

The last, but most far-reaching and potentially damaging, consequence of civil–military dissonance has been politicization of the armed forces.

Politicization of the Armed Forces

According to Huntington, “The principal focus of civil–military relations is the relation of the Officer Corps to the state.”¹⁶ In this context, the RM occupies a unique position that calls for not just a comprehension of security issues, and sharp decision-making skills but also interaction, on a personal level, with the military hierarchy. A degree of familiarity with the senior military leadership would enable him not only to seek their expertise and advice but also to provide guidance/supervision with a firm hand.

The ethos of the Indian officer corps is to defer instinctively to civilian political authority. Many crises can be resolved behind the closed doors of the RM’s office if he and the chiefs can establish an equation of mutual respect and confidence. Unfortunately, such a situation has rarely existed in the South Block and dialogue between MoD and SHQ is conducted either on files or via the media.

In a region full of militaries with political aspirations, the Indian armed forces have fortunately remained completely untainted by political stain or ambition, and it is in the nation’s interest that they continue to be so. This is, regrettably, no longer true of the military Veterans, and they have now openly joined the political fray.

It is depressing fact that the Veterans have slowly but surely been driven to politics over the past 5–6 years by a combination of political indifference and bureaucratic hostility. The MoD bureaucracy has shown utter disdain and insensitivity in handling problems relating to pensions and allowances of ageing Veterans, war-widows and battle casualties. Forced to approach the courts, they were stunned to find a litigious MoD fighting them at every step through special leave petitions, review petitions and curative appeals. In a bizarre development, the MoD has refused to implement even Supreme Court judgments favourable to the veterans on the grounds that they are counter to GoI policy!

In 2008, the frustrated Veterans started resorting to public demonstrations to press their demands, and ever since then their protest movement has gathered mass, momentum and political flavour. Cautionary advice rendered by senior Veterans, including retired Chiefs, at the levels of the RM and Prime Minister has been consistently disregarded. If forcing the Veterans to take to the streets was a

grave mistake, it has been compounded by sustained neglect and mishandling of their affairs – driving a patriotic, disciplined and apolitical segment of society into the jaws of party politics.

Politicization of the armed forces is a self-inflicted injury for which the politico-bureaucratic establishment must accept full blame. The final issue that bears discussion is: why have all the parties involved in this dismal state of affairs remained in the grip of stasis?

Impediments to Civil–military Integration

Major resistance to change comes from the civil services who have resolutely stalled every attempt at integration of the SHQ with MoD, and the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff, since they apprehend erosion of their influence and authority. They are stubborn in their conviction that advice to the politician must come only from the bureaucracy, whose role in decision making is the key to “civilian control” of the armed forces. Notwithstanding their own lack of domain knowledge, the bureaucrats maintain that the SHQ are best retained as Attached Offices of the DoD, and since there is “adequate consultation” between the MoD and SHQ, further integration is neither necessary nor desirable.

Cross-posting of officers between the MoD and SHQ does not find favour with the bureaucrats because, they argue, the Service officers deputed to the MoD would either be of poor calibre or not serve their civilian superiors “loyally”. At the same time, they are quite clear that it would be *infra dig* for an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer to serve under a military superior. The creation of a specialist cadre of civil servants to serve in national security-related billets is rejected because it would be an impediment to the career prospects of rising IAS stars. The consensus is firmly in favour of *status quo*.

An Indian politician is intuitively aware that there are serious flaws in the national security structure, but political survival remains his first priority. His comfort level with the bureaucrat being high, he is happy to leave the management of defence and security matters in his hands. At the same time, he is ill at ease with the soldier and, contrary to all empirical evidence, ready to believe murmurs – possibly originating from bureaucratic or intelligence sources – about the dangers of a potential military *coup d'état*.

For these reasons, politicians have conveniently used the contrary arguments emerging from political circles, the bureaucracy and even from within the military to block reforms that seek to enhance civil–military synergy and tri-Service integration.

The Panacea

Resistance to change, both from within the armed forces as well as the bureaucracy, is a known phenomenon worldwide, mainly because each community sees it as a zero-sum game. It is for this reason that defence reforms in all major democracies have been pushed through by visionary political leadership.

The best example of political activism on this count is the USA, where visionary lawmakers, deeply concerned about national security issues, have ensured that systemic reforms are periodically legislated as laws through Acts of Congress. As a consequence, the bedrock of US national security is formed by the historic National Security Act of Congress 1947 and the Goldwater–Nichols Defence Reorganization Act 1986.¹⁷

Equally important is the fact that US lawmakers have unambiguously outlined, in Title 10 of the US Code of Federal Laws, the functions of the armed forces and their combatant commanders. This chapter provides the legal basis for the roles, missions and organization of each of the services as well as the DoD. By way of contrast, in India, neither Parliament nor the GoI have specified the functions and responsibilities of any military functionary, including the three Chiefs, Commanders-in-Chief and Principle Staff Officers.

India's lawmakers and politicians too could emulate of their US counterparts, post elections-2014, and find the time to take a call on the issue of national security reform. If their wisdom informs them that civil–military dissonance has, indeed, created an urgent need for reforms in India's national security structures, there are a number of options before them:

- Resurrect reports of the 1999 and 2011 Task Forces on security reform and ascertain why certain recommendations were not implemented and whether they can be implemented now.
- Constitute a fresh committee/task force for examination of civil–military relations as they pertain to national security. It can be mandated to recommend amendments to the GoI Rules of Business that will eliminate

ambiguities and sources of internal conflict while streamlining the functioning of the MoD.

- Constitute a Parliamentary Committee for the drafting of an Armed Forces Act, which specifies roles and responsibilities of the MoD and spells out details of the “national security pyramid” and all its functionaries. Such an Act could provide the badly needed impetus to India’s stalled integration and Jointness initiatives.

Given the overwhelming pre-occupation with politics of India’s political leadership and their traditional indifference towards national security issues, the suggestions above may appear unrealistic and Utopian. However, there is nothing to stop a clear-headed and resolute Prime Minister or Defence Minister from implementing national security reform, incrementally, on his own, through a series of executive fiats.

Conclusion

Even if the 2014 general elections throw up a stable government, with a clear majority in Parliament, India should be prepared for a further period of political volatility, economic uncertainty and social unrest. Even as left-wing extremism continues unabated, the pre-election phase provided a glimpse of how India’s inherent fault-lines can be exploited, by politicians, to create further internal dissention. Externally, the display of belligerence by the Chinese and Pakistani armies, during 2013, conveyed the ominous possibility of their acting in collusion. To exacerbate India’s security predicament, the Army–ISI combination, in Pakistan, is possibly awaiting the departure of Coalition forces from Afghanistan before unleashing its “strategic reserve” of Taliban on India.

Should the internal and/or external security scenarios take a sudden turn for the worst, India would need its armed forces to be in a high state of combat-readiness, morale and motivation – ready to react swiftly, to orders of the political leadership. India’s newly elected government, however, would do well to reflect whether such a response can be expected from a military, which has suffered from politico-bureaucratic neglect and mismanagement of its affairs for many decades.

While the failure of the MoD to equip our armed forces for war has adversely impacted their combat capability, the maladroit handling of matters relating to the

military's senior leadership has visibly affected the morale and cohesion of our forces, and possibly set them on the path of politicization.

Under such circumstances, we must recognize that the reassurance that we derive from our large conventional forces and nuclear arsenal may be illusory. The leveraging of such potent systems, in the interests of national security, and their judicious management requires not only an efficient higher defence organization, but more importantly the means of crafting of an astute policy and strategy. We have neither. Before we can attempt to redress the lacunae in our national security structure, we must carefully identify and acknowledge the shortcomings, and civil–military dissonance constitutes a primary fault-line.

Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in his address at the Combined Commanders' Conference in November 2013, made some frank but startling statements that deserve attention. In a rare departure from the expression of proforma sentiments, Dr Singh focused on two of the most debilitating inadequacies afflicting India's national security edifice. He called for "urgent and tangible progress" in establishment of "the right structures for higher defence management" and spoke of "the appropriate civil–military balance in decision making". He also struck a wistful note by making mention of "the different Task Force reports that our government has initiated".¹⁸

The "right structure" for higher defence management is obviously one in which the armed forces are totally integrated with the MoD, and the "appropriate civil–military balance" will be struck once they are allowed participation in national security decision making. However, the fact that recommendations of successive committees, groups of ministers and task forces have been consigned into oblivion speaks of the helplessness of a myopic and beleaguered polity, as well as of an obdurate bureaucracy.

The former PM's speech may have been a case of "too little, too late", but for a Head of Government publically to admit serious national security voids constitutes as much an admission of failure as a signpost to the "way ahead" for his successor. This catharsis would have served a useful purpose if it motivates the new government to initiate remedial measures.

Notes

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4. Ibid, p. 4.
5. Samuel H. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1957), pp. vii, 2.
6. Ibid, pp. 80–81.
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13. Adm Arun Prakash (Retd), *Defence Reforms: Contemporary Debates and Issues*. IDSA Monograph Series No. 6, July 2012, p. 23
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15. Available in the public domain at http://cabsec.nic.in/allocation_order.php.
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18. Excerpts of address by the PM at the Combined Commanders' Conference on November 22, 2013, available online at <http://pmindia.nic.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1396> (accessed on April 4, 2014).