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VIEWPOINT

The Soldier, the State and the Society in India: A Precarious Balance[1]

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These are difficult times for civil–military relations in India. They may appear normal superficially but lurking beneath the surface are serious differences. "More than ever the balance between the Indian state, the Indian society and the nation's military institutions is out of kilter. This can have grave implications if the equilibrium is not promptly restored because only nations which are successful in evolving a properly balanced pattern of civil–military relations succeed in their search for security while those who fail, merely end up squandering their limited resources and put their national security at risk".[2] While the Indian State cannot absolve itself of the way it has handled the nation's military, Indian military also needs to do some serious introspection. "Blaming the government for all the ills afflicting the defence sector seems to be becoming the default position within the ranks of the military and taking this too far can be really dangerous for the liberal democratic ethos of this nation".[3]

Though it may not appear so on the surface, these are difficult times for civil–military relations in India. They may appear normal superficially but lurking beneath the surface are serious differences that may boil over into the open if not managed with due care. That the highest decision-makers in the country are aware of this challenge was evident when then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, addressing the annual Combined Commander's Conference in November 2013 underscored:

> *There have been concerns that have been raised in recent times about the nature of civil–military relations in our country. Let me assert … that the political leadership of India has the highest faith in its military and its institutional rectitude within the democratic framework. The apolitical nature of our military and its proven professionalism are the envy of the world and have also nurtured the Indian democratic experience.*[4]

Yet when juxtaposed with the purported reports of the unnotified movement of two army units towards the national capital in January 2012 ringing alarm bells in the highest echelons of government, the situation appears precarious with little effort being made to go beyond mere words in rectifying the situation.[5] It remains far from clear as to how the Indian State has allowed the trust between institutions that vitally underpins its functioning be so eroded.

A Trinity in Disarray

The purposes to which military power is directed, depend on, and are a reflection of, their societies. The ends to which warfare is put, what it is designed to achieve, are shaped by society. At the same time war, success or failure, shapes society – culturally, economically, politically and technologically. War is, therefore, a dynamic process shaping and being shaped by the world in which it is used. Carl Von Clausewitz highlighted the importance of the relationship between the people, the government and the armed forces, calling them a remarkable, or paradoxical, trinity. War is

> *… a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.*

> *The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; and the third the government.*

From this excerpt from *On War*, Clausewitz's trinity emerges as: irrational forces (primordial violence), non-rational forces (chance) and rationality (war's subordination to reason). In turn, this trinity is connected by Clausewitz to the people (irrational forces), the army (chance) and the government or state (war's subordination to reason).[6]

The government requires that the armed forces be loyal and obedient, to articulate their requirements, to provide value for money and to be successful in any endeavour. The armed forces require that the government provide resources, a legal framework to provide legitimacy within which to operate and political direction including a clear "End State" to any campaign. The people require their government to have integrity, honesty, to enact and reflect the public's will, and to be competent. In turn, the government requires that the people give it money, legitimacy (their votes) and direction. The people require the armed forces to be loyal and obedient, be successful and ultimately to provide "security" and perhaps today to be a "force for good". The armed forces require of the people: recruits, support (moral and physical), an industrial base, sympathy and understanding, and, ideally, political engagement. The military is a reflection of the society – a dark one – that is relied upon by the society to accomplish tasks pertaining to the use of violence that the society at large feels squeamish about.

Examining the Indian case even cursorily, it should be clear that

> *… more than ever the balance between the Indian state, the Indian society and the nation's military institutions is out of kilter. This can have grave implications if the equilibrium is not promptly restored because only nations which are successful in evolving a properly balanced pattern of civil–military relations succeed in their search for security while those who fail, merely end up squandering their limited resources and put their national security at risk.[7]*

The contract that a state makes with its soldiers underpins its very survival. "For when its territorial integrity and political independence are under threat, the nation looks upon the only instrument that can protect it – its armed forces".[8] As theorists of International Relations have long argued,

> *... politics among nations is conducted in the brooding shadow of violence. Either a state remains able and willing to use force to preserve and enhance its interests or it is forced to live at the mercy of its militarily powerful counterpart. While all governments have to look for a considered bargain between their commitments and available resources, a responsible government will always be aware of the serious implications of not spending adequate resources on defence.*[9]

This has even more resonance in a country like India, which is flanked by two formidable adversaries on two sides of its borders and rising domestic turmoil.

Persisting Fear of 'the Man on Horseback'

Indian politicians after independence in 1947 viewed the Indian Army with suspicion as including the last supporters of the British Raj and did their best to isolate the military from policy and influence. This attitude was further reinforced by the views of two giants of the Indian nationalist movement, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi's ardent belief in non-violence left little room for accepting the role of the use of force in an independent India. It also shaped the views on military and defence of the first generation of post-independence political leaders in India. But more important has been the legacy of Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, who laid the institutional foundations for civil–military relations in India. His obsession with economic development was only matched by his disdain and distrust of the military, resulting in not only the sidelining of defence planning in India"[10] but also in one of the most civilian dominated forces of any democratic country.[11]

Nehru also ensured that the experiences in neighbouring Pakistan, where the military had become the dominant political force soon after independence, would not be repeated in India by institutionalizing civilian supremacy over the country's military apparatus. The civilian elite also did not want the emergence of a rival elite with direct access to political leadership. Two significant changes immediately after independence that reduced the influence of the military and strengthened civilian control were the abolition of the post of Commander-in-Chief that had hitherto been the main military advisor to the government, and the strengthening of the civilian-led Ministry of Defence.[12] Other organizational changes followed that further strengthened civilian hold over the armed forces. It has been argued that, as a consequence,

India is among only a handful of nations where civilian administrations wield so much power over the military.[13]

Along with Nehru, another civilian who left a lasting impact on the evolution of civil–military relations was V. K. Krishna Menon, India's Minister of Defence from 1957 to 1962. During his tenure, which has been described as the most controversial stewardship of the Indian Defence Ministry, he heralded a number of organizational changes that were not very popular with the armed forces.[14] The first major civil–military clash in independent India also took place under his watch, when B. K. Thimayya, the then well-respected Chief of Army, decided to bypass Menon in 1959 and went straight to the Prime Minister with his litany of complaints that included, among others, Menon's interference in the administration of the armed forces. The situation was so precarious that Thimayya even submitted his resignation to Nehru, which he was persuaded to withdraw later.[15] While this episode demonstrated that the strength of civil–military relations in India, in so far as Thimayya used the due process to challenge his civilian superior, it also revealed the dangers of civilian intervention in matters which the military feels belong to its domain. And the consequences of such civil–military friction would be grave for India in the 1962 war with China.[16]

Despite lacking military experience, Nehru and Menon were actively involved in operational level planning before the outbreak of the Sino-Indian war of 1962.[17] As a consequence, when China won the war decisively, the blame was laid on the doors of Nehru and Menon. Menon resigned, while Nehru's reputation suffered a lasting damage. It also made it clear, both to the civilians and the military, that purely operational matters were best left to the military. It has been suggested by some that since then a convention has been established, whereby, while the operational directive is laid down by the political leadership, the actual planning of operation is left to the Chiefs of Staff.[18,19]

But this did not help in rectifying the imbalance in civil–military ties in the country. Stephen Cohen, a scholar of South Asian politics, has written that "senior intelligence officers indicate that they have detected at least three major coup attempts by Indian generals", as recently as the 1980s, though he goes on to suggest that "there is no credible evidence of such plots, but insecure politicians and bureaucrats, many of whom have a stereotyped image of the military, listen to these warnings".

Despite exhortations from various high-level committees, successive Indian governments have been unwilling to reform the highly inefficient and ineffective

national security apparatus by bringing the Indian military into the decision-making loop, thereby leading to even greater alienation in the military. Indian national security system, therefore, remains highly fragmented and lacks any semblance of coordination.

Ambivalence on the Role of Force

A nation's vital interests, in the ultimate analysis, can only be preserved and enhanced if the nation has sufficient power capabilities at its disposal. But not only must a nation possess such capabilities, there must also be a willingness to employ the required forms of power in pursuit of those interests. India's lack of an instinct for power is most palpable in the realm of the military where unlike other major global powers of the past and the present, India has failed to master the creation, deployment and use of its military instruments in support of its national objectives.[20] Nehru envisioned making India a global leader without any help from the nation's armed forces, arguing, "the right approach to defence is to avoid having unfriendly relations with other countries – to put it differently, war today is, and ought to be, out of question".[21] War has been systematically factored out of Indian foreign policy and national security matrix with the resulting ambiguity about India's ability to withstand major wars of the future. The modern state system, in fact the very nature of the state itself, has been determined to a significant degree by the changing demands of war and it has developed through a series of what Columbia University Professor, Philip Bobbitt has called "Epochal Wars".[22] A defining feature of any state is its ability to make war and keep peace.[23]

Military power, more often than not, affects the success with which other instruments of statecraft are employed as it always lurks in the background of inter-state relations, even when nations are at peace with each other. Military power remains central to the course of international politics as force retains its role as the final arbiter among states in an anarchical international system. States may not always need to resort to the actual use of force but military power vitally affects the manner in which states deal with each other even during peace time; despite what the protagonists of globalization and liberal institutionalism might claim. A state's diplomatic posture will lack effectiveness if it is not backed by a credible military posture. In the words of political scientist Thomas Schelling, "Like the threat of a strike in industrial relations, the threat of divorce in a family dispute, or the threat of

bolting the party at a political convention, the threat of violence continuously circumscribes international politics."[24] Even in the age of nuclear weapons, contrary to suggestions in some quarters that the utility of force has declined, military strategy has merely morphed into the art of coercion, of intimidation, a contest of nerves and risk-taking and what has been termed as "the diplomacy of violence".[25]

Few nations face the kind of security challenges that confront India. Yet, since independence, military was never seen as a central instrument in the achievement of Indian national priorities with the tendency of Indian political elites to downplay the importance of military power. India ignored its defence sector after independence and paid inadequate attention to its defence needs. Even though the policy-makers themselves had little knowledge of critical defence issues, the defence forces had little or no role in the formulation of defence policy till 1962.[26] Divorcing foreign policy from military power was a recipe for disaster as India realized in 1962 when even Nehru was forced to concede that "military weakness has been a temptation, and a little military strength may be a deterrent".[27] A state's legitimacy is tied to its ability to monopolize the use of force and operate effectively in an international strategic environment and India had lacked clarity on this relationship between the use of force and its foreign policy priorities.

> *The Indian society, meanwhile, remains apathetic on defence issues. Wars become media spectacles, giving rare opportunities to journalists to show off their temporary bravery by going to the frontlines for a few hours and the adrenaline rush of covering a war from the inside. And then when it is all over, when the soldiers have been interred into their graves, the society moves on to new and more exciting spectacles, oblivious to the everyday struggles of the nation's soldiers on the frontlines.[28]*

Soldiers are forgotten by the wider society as swiftly as they are remembered during times of crises but with even greater alacrity than the State.

A Rudderless Military

The Indian military, for its part, is becoming ever more vocal, often exhibiting its "growing disdain for their civilian masters and about their knowledge of defence issues. Indian political class lacks any substantive understanding of the role of force in

the pursuit of national interests and projecting national values".[29] Moreover, civilian expertise on defence issues is also largely absent in India. Hardly any research is encouraged on defence-related issues in Indian universities and policy think-tanks, when it comes to such issues, are crowded by military officials. As a result, ex-servicemen tend to "monopolize the discourse on national security and defence issues. They should certainly have an important voice on these matters but theirs should not be the only voice".[30]

It is also not entirely clear if the top leadership of the armed forces is really up to the task of harmonizing the growing imbalance in civil–military relations. "The behaviour of the top leadership of the armed services is in danger of being perceived as increasingly petty and bureaucratic itself even though the Indian armed forces have often complained of the politico-bureaucratic nexus thwarting the rights of the defence services".[31] The three services have dramatically different views about their role in India's security matrix and there has been little effort to ensure greater coordination. 'Jointness' is not something that the three services have been serious about.

"Blaming the government for all the ills afflicting the defence sector seems to be becoming the default position within the ranks of the military and this can be really dangerous for the liberal democratic ethos of this nation",[32] if not corrected on an urgent basis.

> The state is responsible for the allocation of resources among important societal values of which military security is but one. It is also important for the leadership of the Indian military to recognise that in a democracy, civilians have a right to be wrong. Moreover, Indian armed forces need fundamental reforms, a restructuring that enables them to operate with utmost efficiency in a rapidly evolving domestic and global context. Amidst all the hype surrounding corruption in the defence sector, it is important to remember that India is losing precious time by continuing with a defence policy that remains mired in a time-warp. And the onus is on the armed forces leadership to give the Indian defence policy a new direction, a trajectory that does justice to India's rising stature in the global inter-state hierarchy. The Indian politico-bureaucratic establishment is not the only guilty party in this dynamic as the Indian armed forces also have a lot to answer for.[33]

Resources alone, will not make Indian armed forces the envy of its adversaries. It is the policy direction that is set by the military leadership and the quality of training imparted to its manpower that will make the difference. The debate on the wide-ranging changes that India's defence set-up needs, should have been initiated long back by the armed forces themselves.

The questions that need to be debated and answered include: Does India have a 21st-century military in terms of doctrine and force structure? Have the doctrines and force structures evolved in line with the equipments that the nation's resources are being spent on? Does India's command and control processes reflect the changing strategic and operational requirements? Does the Indian military have the capacity to initiate military actions on very short notice and actually conduct military operations that result in something other than a stalemate, something that India might have wanted to do during Operation Parakram in 2001–2002 but could not? Have the Indian armed forces got the balance between capital and labour right?[34] These questions still remain adequately answered even as the focus has been on procurement-related issues. And the leadership of the three services will have to bear a large part of the responsibility for failing to raise these issues to the top of the defence policy agenda.[35]

Indian Military's Intellectual Deficit

India desperately needs a defence policy that can do justice to its rising aspirations and its armed forces need to rise to this challenge. It is time for the Indian defence forces to start producing men and women of intellectual leadership and administrative acumen that this time in India's history demands. The nature of the challenges facing defence forces in the 21st century emphasizes the vital requirement of education in the military officer's career. While a key strength of the military organization is its cohesiveness, underpinned by doctrine and systems, it is also true that the challenges posed by the use of military force in the world today require officers who can think and act independently of templates or formulaic guidelines. These challenges flow from changes in the strategic environment driven by social, economic and political factors, which in turn affect the character of warfare and, by extension, security as a whole. As a consequence, there has long been a need to focus on enhancing the level of Professional Military Education (PME) in India, something that Indian armed forces have given short shrift.

The aims of modern PME should be to develop the military officers' knowledge and understanding of defence in the modern world; to demand critical engagement with current research and advanced scholarship on defence and its relationship with the fields of international relations, security studies, military history, war studies and operational experience; to encourage a systematic and reflective understanding of contemporary conflicts and the issues surrounding them; to promote initiative, originality, creativity and independence of thought in identifying, researching, judging and solving fundamental intellectual problems in this area of study; and to develop relevant transferable skills, especially communication, use of information technology and organization and management of the learning process. Indian PME lacks in every single one these dimensions. As a military professional, the quality of abstract and theoretical analysis will increasingly underpin the utility and value of the armed forces to its clients (government and society). And it is here that the PME in India continues to lag behind most spectacularly. This needs to be rectified with some urgency if India wants to produce military officers who are capable of operating in highly complex security environment.

The Indian military needs to evolve a culture of independent strategic thinking on an urgent basis, one that allows its soldiers to comprehend national security in its various dimensions. This will be especially true of the emerging strategic environment where understanding the knowledge terrain will be as important for future soldiers as knowing the geography or topology of the battlefield was in the past. The setting up of the INDU (Indian National Defence University) is a long-awaited step that can help it in achieving this goal but only if it is led and structured professionally. Otherwise, there is a danger that excessive political interference, bureaucratic inertia and inter-services rivalry might end up making it another sub-standard institution of higher learning that dot the national landscape. And that would be a real tragedy because as Thucydides long back suggested "the nation that makes great distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools".

Remember Clausewitz

Clausewitz understood well the bloody human consequences of decisions taken regarding war. He experienced the noise, the choking gun smoke, the fear of the

Napoleonic battlefield. He saw the devastating impact of a foraging army on the civilian population through which it marched. But he also said:

> *This is the way that the matter must be viewed, and it is to no purpose, it is even against ones better interest, to turn away from the consideration of the real nature of the affair because the horror of its elements excites repugnance.*

It is the task of not only the soldier but the state and the society at large as well to study war, to think about it carefully and seriously, to consider it in all its multiple guises, assessing its different constituents, its causes and consequences.

> *The military exists to serve the state but a military that lacks societal prestige and the attention of the state will not only endanger the security of the state but will also pose a challenge to the liberal societal values that we as Indians so love to espouse. It has become imperative now to get the balance between the Indian state, society and its military institutions right if India is to avoid the high costs that will inevitably follow if the present turmoil persists.[36]*

Unless rectified, this will have long-term negative consequences not only for India's internal cohesion but also for its ability to wield its military effectively as an instrument of foreign policy. And that would be a real tragedy for a nation that aspires to emerge as a major global power.

Notes

1. This viewpoint is a continuation of the work of the author, in particular from his paper "Civil–military Relations in India: Difficult Times," *Journal of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies*, Winter edition (2008), and from his book *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
2. Pant, "Civil–military Relations in India: Difficult Times".
3. Ibid.
4. Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh's address to the Combined Commander's Conference in November 2013 is available at http://pmindia.gov.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=1396
5. "The January night Raisina Hill was spooked: Two key Army units moved towards Delhi without notifying Govt", *Indian Express*, September 20, 2013.

6. For details, see Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

7. Pant, "Civil–military Relations in India: Difficult Times".

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy*.

11. Stephen P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 127–130.

12. Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 17–173.

13. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy*.

14. P. R. Chari, "Civil–military Relations in India", *Armed Forces and Society*, 4 (November 1977), 13–15.

15. Ibid., pp. 15–17.

16. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy*.

17. Cohen, *The Indian Army*, op. cit., p. 176.

18. P.R. Chari, "Civil–military Relations of India", *Link* (August 15, 1977), p. 75.

19. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy*.

20. This point has been eloquently elaborated in Ashley J. Tellis, "Future Fire: Challenges Facing Indian Defense Policy in the New Century," Delivered at the India Today Conclave, New Delhi, March 13, 2004, available at http://www.ceip.org/files/pdf/futurefire.pdf

21. Quoted in P.V.R. Rao, *India's Defence Policy and Organisation Since Independence* (New Delhi: The United Services Institution of India, 1977), pp. 5–6.

22. This argument has been explicated in Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

23. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy*.

24. Thomas Schelling, "The Diplomacy of Violence", in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Longman, 2003), p. 179.

25. Pant, *Contemporary Debates in Indian Foreign and Security Policy*.

26. K. Subrahmanyam, *Perspectives in Defence Planning* (New Delhi: Abhinav, 1972), pp. 126–133.

27. Lorne J. Kavic, *India's Quest for Security: Defence Policies, 1947–1965* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 192.

28. Pant, "Civil–military Relations in India: Difficult Times".

29. Pant, "Civil–military Relations in India: Difficult Times".

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. For details, see Harsh V. Pant, "Armed forces should put their house in order", Rediff.com, August 21, 2008, available at http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/aug/21guest.htm

36. Pant, "Civil–military Relations in India: Difficult Times".