Higher Defence Management: Principles and Practice in India

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The basic and overriding principles of higher defence organisation and management of the most crucial element of a country, its military power can be summed up in three broad segments as follows:

- **Civilian (Political) Control of the Military:** The Indian military has never questioned this principle, even if in some cases, the political decisions in the force development and employment appeared to have been highly questionable in method and goals. For example, the elected government at the turn of the century allowed large quantities of funds allocated and provided for in the budget to lapse unused year after year. The result was a serious adverse effect on modernisation of the armed forces. Aerospace power has acquired increasing salience and effect on the outcome of war and peace on the surface of the earth during the past hundred years. Two centuries ago, the now well known authority on war and the military power of a state, Carl Von Clausewitz, looking at these issues from various angles, arrived at two crucial conclusions:
  - War (normally undertaken by the military) is an extension of politics by other means. Hence, any employment of the military

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- Flowing from the above, military power should be unequivocally controlled by the civilian political system, especially in democracies, since it carries the ultimate authority, responsibility and accountability for the decisions related to military power and its employment and effects.
- As a continuation of the above, unity of command is crucial in employment of military power. While the first principle has been well understood for decades in both war and peace by the Indian military, at times, there emerges some confusion in respect to this principle. When Clausewitz wrote his thesis, it related only to land warfare (based on his observations in Central Europe). Since then, war has expanded into three dimensions, each with its own characteristics and attributes that have reached their own high levels of specialisation, essentially because the medium in which that particular force operates is different and mostly mutually exclusive which has to be made inclusive by joint thinking, planning and execution, the last being done by the single Service in most cases. Unity of command has to be maintained within the Service that operates in its own medium; and at a higher level (defence management level) by the directions of the political leaders among the three components of military power. This is why the Chiefs of Staff Committee was established as the key committee of the higher defence organisation in 1947.

- **Joint Operations:** It does not require supernatural powers to know that the whole functioning at the highest levels of synergy is far more effective than the mere sum total of all components of military power. The classical

example is that of the grossly belated demand for the use of the Indian Air Force (IAF) in Chhamb when the sun was already setting in the face of a massive Pakistani armour-artillery offensive appropriately called "Grand Slam" against an Indian "truncated brigade" on September 1, 1965.[1] The Pakistani military, strongly supported by its high-technology air force, could have easily cut the Indian Army's lines of communication into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) at Akhnur bridge over the Chenab river before the end of the following day. Twenty-six sorties (12 of the good old Vampire and 16 of the Mystere) approaching last light stopped the Grand Slam in its tracks with the sacrifice of four Vampires and three pilots. It has never been explained why the brigade's persistent demands for air support since 1100 hrs that day against advancing Pakistani armour were never conveyed to the Indian Air Force. Gen Musa, the Pakistan Army's Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) later ascribed the failure to move forward to the employment of the IAF at, and after, sunset.[2] Indians constituted 70 per cent of the XIV Army in Burma in 1944 that defeated the Japanese, which was supported by the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF). Examples from Burma to Kargil are innumerable. But still the result of the Group of Minister's Report, distorted by the media and numerous self-appointed "strategic" experts, has been to reinforce the flawed view that each Service fights its own war separately. They do not realise that each Service fights in its own medium (due its very characteristics) but for a common cause and aim laid down by the political leaders.

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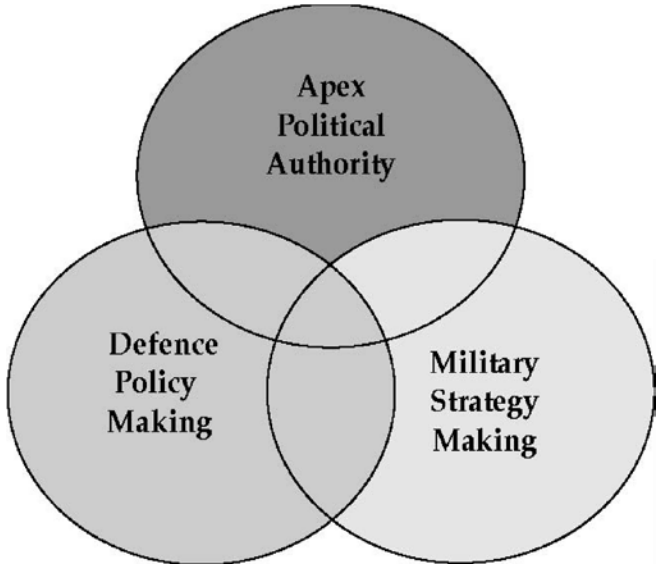
Political-Military Synergy

As noted above, the principle of political control of the military is a core principle for managing a country's military power in both peace and war. China does this through a political-military top leadership manned CMC (Central Military Commission) the highest body to decide on matters of peace, war and force planning. But most analyses ignore one of the fundamental realities: that military logic and political imperatives/perceptions may diverge, often in very fundamental ways. What is required for sound policies is a synergy among the political aims, aspirations, priorities, handicaps, etc., on one side, and the military necessities of technology, manpower, strategy, and a whole range of vital issues, on the other (see Fig. 1). This would require institutions that are intermeshed into a coherent and effective organisation for higher defence management and have the authority and responsibility to undertake these tasks. In this context, two decision-making challenges that stand out are those of investing resources in military capabilities and the direction of military operations.

In any sound effective higher defence system, there will always be a critical necessity of dialogue between the top political and military leadership. To be able to do so, there has to be an ongoing dialogue (in a formal forum so that decisions taken are processed down the line). This may need to be replicated down at least one or two levels which may deal with more routine issues.

Fig. 1: Higher Defence Planning and Management



Note: The Chiefs and the COSC lie in the area of overlap of the three segments and, thus, form the critical link among the means, ways and ends.

Since we inherited British institutions and/or derived our own from the British system, it would be of use to note that its Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) was formed in 1895 and for more than a century before World War II, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) was chaired by the Prime Minister of England, thus, making the consultation and synergising of political and military aims near total. Winston Churchill later expressed his disappointment that he could not chair all the meetings of the COSC during the long world war and had asked the Defence Minister to do so in his place. At the same time, a three-star officer was attached to the Prime Minister and his office to facilitate the mutual understanding and organisation of the Cabinet meetings.[3] The Military Wing in the Cabinet Secretariat was no doubt the preliminary step toward this goal.

Our higher defence organisation was set up (based on the advice of Lord Ismay) by a Cabinet resolution on September 24, 1947. It set up the key committees, the most important being the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) to take all decisions related to military power which required Cabinet approval. The armed forces Chiefs were in attendance and, hence, a deficit in terms of regular dialogue between military and political leaders was born with this proposal, but they would answer questions when asked by the DCC members. On the other hand, unlike now, in practice, the Chiefs had direct access to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru which certainly reduced dramatically after the "Thimayya affair" in 1959. But the DCC had almost stopped functioning by about 1957 when Krishna Menon took over as the Defence Minister.

At the military level, the most important committee established (on the British and US patterns) is the COSC, located in the Cabinet Secretariat with its Military Wing. Here, the Report of the Group of Ministers which was submitted in February 2001, with respect to the COSC, is in error in saying, "The COSC (Chiefs of Staff Committee) has not been effective in fulfilling its mandate."[4] It does not seem to make anyone think of the implications of such a judgment on the morale and dedication of junior officers and even Personnel Below Officer Rank (PBOR) who almost worship every Chief. When I was asked for my opinion on the report by one of the signatories, I pointed out that (i) the statement [on which the logic of the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) was sought to be built up] was misleading since it did not refer to any particular COSC while the country had won all its wars except one in which the COSC/DCC did not appear to have been in the driving seat; (ii) the actual mandate as known was to advise the DCC on all matters of military operations, etc.; (iii) there was no DCC since 1962 and one could only assume that it was subsumed into the Emergency Committee of the Cabinet (ECC). But when the national emergency was over, the DCC was not restored. In 1962, the COSC was taken out of the Cabinet Secretariat (and, hence,

no longer part of the government, according to the Rules of Business of the Government of India 1961. The COSC mandate, thus, became a casualty of the Rules of Business which placed the COSC and the Armed Services in the category of subordinate services [like the Central Public Works Department (CPWD), etc.]. No doubt, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) undertook some of the role of the old DCC, but the dialogue between the top political and military leaders reduced to nothingness; (iv), if the COSC was not fulfilling its mandate, then the logical course of action to the political leaders was to ensure this instead of a vague conclusion which potentially was derogatory judgement really against the political leadership under whom the COSC functions, besides every Chief since 1947.

The higher defence organisation, as set up in 1947, all said and done, was only a partial job. The COSC with two crucial committees to assist the COSC: the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) "with permanent staff in permanent session" and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) actually without any a staff. It was to be chaired by a Joint Secretary from the Ministry of External Affairs. Unfortunately, the permanent staff for the JPC was never set up, creating a crucial deficit in the military planning (for operations and future force development). This naturally reduced the limited meetings of the DCC only to budgetary issues rather than military operational planning. One only has to look at the record of the 1947-48 War to understand the role of the DCC as a link between the political and military leadership. In 1962, its absence produced a military disaster; and even in 1965, though Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri spent a fair amount of time in separate discussions on the impending war, the Chief of the Air Staff was not even informed of the Prime Minister's decision that the armed forces were free to choose their time and place to respond to the Pakistani aggression. Hence, the near fiasco on September 1, that was finally retrieved by the IAF at quite a cost.

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Finally, a Defence Planning Staff of the COSC was established almost four decades later in 1986, which was further replaced by a top heavy Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) of the COSC. Other committees were also sanctioned. But the crucial component on the lines of the British system was the system of Boards and Councils, for each Service, all under a political leader equivalent to the present Ministers of State, which facilitated force planning, especially for modernisation. In fact, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru announced in the Parliament on April 1, 1955 (when the title of Commander-in-Chief of the Service Chiefs was abolished) that Board and Councils would be soon established. These obviously would have shifted the onus of military planning and decision-making back to the political system. But, unfortunately, these have never been set up.[5] The result, as we know, is that the IAF has now a 24 per cent unplanned deficit in its combat force level even from the figure (39 squadrons) which was adopted as an interim step, although 50 combat squadrons were sanctioned by the ECC in March 1963. Given the furious modernisation and expansion of the air forces of both our not-so-friendly neighbours, prudence would have demanded that we attempt to reach the 1963 level to begin with while working out the final force level. The Defence Minister had officially stated a few years ago that the IAF would reach 42 combat squadrons by 2022. Nothing short of a miracle can achieve this at the present pace of acquisition of replacements of even scheduled known retirements.

Integrated Ministry of Defence

The major impact of the slow and steady dissolution of the sanctioned

higher defence organisation, which itself, as pointed out earlier, was only a part of the total, has been to progressively enlarge the distance between the political and military leadership. One result of this has been the inevitable deterioration of civil-military relations, that does not bode well, and needs to be examined and reversed at the earliest. The central problem which has led to this situation of a near vacuum in political-military leadership contact and understanding each other's imperatives has also led to that gap being filled by the civil bureaucratic system. By itself, there is nothing wrong with having a significant number of civilian staff in the Ministry of Defence. But when that staff in the ministry is almost wholly manned by civil bureaucrats [not necessarily from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS)] and the ministry occupies a superior hierarchical position than the professional military staff at the Service Headquarters, as a subordinate one (whichever way you juggle the semantics), then there is an obvious lacunae in civil-military relations due to institutional inequality. Many eminent political leaders have told me that the political leader, even when he knows the role of his ministry well, prefers to have civilian senior staff to come into contact with him. This does not necessarily indicate that political leaders of the recent generations are worried about a military takeover and, hence, the military "must be kept in place down under," but is a matter now of continuing on the wrong path, which a rising major power simply cannot afford. This institutional hierarchy at all levels below the top political and military leadership has ossified the system of defence management. Its solution was not the delegation of revenue expenditure to the armed forces (since the rules governing public expenditure cannot be changed unless there are a good, sound reasons for it). But a joint civil-military staff, if nothing else, will reduce the ever rising costs and manpower of managing defence significantly and this could be utilised for better combat capabilities.

While many of us have been arguing for a joint integrated Ministry of Defence, there has been reluctance on both (civil and military)

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sides to actually move toward that. Sardar Swaran Singh as Defence Minister in 1973 was the first to authorise a military "Planning Officer" from each Service in both the Departments of Defence and Defence Production. But the experiment slowly fizzled out and is now at a miniscule level. But now, after numerous cadre reviews such integration may create more problems than solve any because of the problems of *inter-se* seniority, equivalence in rank or length in service, protocol issues, and so on. We have got our manpower policies into a *cul-de-sac*: instead of separating the pay from the rank [and keeping it as a grade pay, as in the IAS and Indian Foreign Service (IFS)] we have insisted on "upgradation" (which in real terms is a degradation of rank, though an increase in pay). And then we complain about loss of respect, prestige and status. It has inevitably increased the average age of the fighting forces.

With the retirement of Gen VK Singh (who was commissioned in 1971 though he did not take active part in the 1971 War), *we are now a truly peace-time military that would be required to go into operations with very little time to even reflect on strategy.* This, among many other things, requires a fundamentally younger Service and commanders than we have today; but, in reality, we are only going to get older. The Chinese, on the other side, have managed to reduce the average age of top political and military leaders from around 76 years two decades ago to close to 60 now. They have laid down the upper ages of commanders of operational formations and units; and the highest for a divisional commander is 42 years!

The structure of the ministry is a major factor for its inefficiency in spite of outstanding and dedicated officers at all levels. This is due to the fact that every case and step goes through multiple scrutinies many

times over; inter-Service matters are even more complex. The obvious answer from the very beginning has been to ensure establishment of a professional integrated Ministry of Defence. In principle, this still holds good. In fact, if we look closely at the British and US system, there is no "Service Headquarters." Instead, there is a Department of Defence, and separate Departments of the Army, Air Force, Navy, Research and Development (R&D), and so on, with the crucial factor that each of these is headed by a political leader. There is a Secretary of the Air Force, for example, but he is a political appointee, and it is so also for other departments. He has a number of Under-Secretaries and a chain of civil/ military staff down the line with different specialisations and experience. Why can this system not be adopted in India?

In the present organisation, the Chief wears two hats: that of the Commander-in-Chief of the Service and its Chief of Staff. Here, we need to recognise that these are statutory appointments. The former, as the name suggests, is a command appointment to plan and prepare the force for any eventuality which requires military force for any eventuality. On the other hand, the second post is essentially for planning and overseeing force development for the future. The former needs a small operational staff, whereas the latter would need varied expertise and specialisations ranging from training to works to administrative planning, etc. As the Commander-in-Chief, the focus of the military leader would be on the immediate task and challenges, and the force and equipment available. He will have to fight with what he has and not something that will come in even two years later. Hence, he spends most of his time on regular visits to operational units to oversee their preparedness, make plans for numerous contingencies, and so on. As Chief of Staff, he would need to look 30-40 years ahead. Both will have their PSOs (Principal Staff Officers), as now. But the further composition of the staff would be different. Officers at the working level on the force planning segment under the Chief of the Staff would need to spend longer tenures on staff compared to those who

naturally have to be picked for their proficiency in combat orientation and operations. Training in the Service would need to be reorganised with the overall manpower planning in mind.

Notes

1. For details of the war, see Jasjit Singh, *The ICON: Biography of the Marshal of IAF Arjan Singh*, 2nd Edition (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2011).
2. Gen Mohammad Musa, C-in-C Pakistan Army, *My Version: India Pakistan War 1965* (Lahore: Wajidalis; 1983), p. 42.
3. Lord Ismay, who drafted the initial steps of our higher defence organisation, had been adviser to Churchill throughout World War II. It also must be noted that during the Kashmir War, 1947-48, Prime Minister Nehru had requested Lord Mountbatten to chair the DCC (and Lord Ismay was on Mountbatten's staff).
4. Report of the Group of Ministers on *Management of National Security,* February 2001.
5. The reason for this was the objection of Gen KS Thimayya and the Army top leadership.