Higher Defence Management: Lessons from the 1962 Conflict

Kapil Kak

Introduction

China's military invasion in October 1962, extending from Arunachal Pradesh [then Northeast Frontier Agency (NEFA) to Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)], against which the nation failed to defend itself, was independent India's darkest hour. At the macro level, it was a national security double whammy — "two major failures: one of India's foreign policy, particularly towards China; and the other of the country's defence policy (until then deliberately configured to low defence budgets and limited modernisation). This failure to manage the border conflict properly resulted in a humiliating military reverse,"[1] a trauma which left a scar on the national psyche.

While the official history of the conflict remains 'restricted', many drawbacks in the higher defence management led to India's military debacle. One, a strategically and militarily ill-informed and inept political leadership that was unequal to the task. It had woefully inadequate military understanding and even less knowledge of air power, and was, consequently, self-deterred from employing the Indian Air Force (IAF), an option that could have turned the tide somewhat. Two, a monumental

Air Vice Marshal **Kapil Kak** (Retd) is an independent commentator on national security issues.

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disconnect between an inherently flawed intelligence—based on instinct, rather than assessments anchored in rigorous analyses—and the resultant ill-conceived military actions. Three, an ill-prepared Army, facing acute shortfalls in weapons, logistics and clothing, was hastily deployed in the high Himalayas against a foe far better placed in terms of equipment, personnel and terrain. And, most importantly, sheer inability to co-relate political strategies with military means. Thus, a military defeat was made inevitable, by an extremely feeble, wholly imbalanced and non-functional higher direction of war.

This paper would endeavour to provide some answers to the questions that arise in the consideration of the foregoing issues. And also whether India's defence policy mavens have learned appropriate lessons, half a century after that painful conflict, and addressed the multiple disjunctions, vertical and horizontal and civil and military, which were so palpable in the higher direction of that war.

Political-Military Interfaces

In the normal course, the India-Pakistan conflict of 1947-48 and the subsequent limited action by the armed forces in Goa in 1961 should have served as instructive testing grounds for India's politico- military interfaces and the related structures and processes of higher defence management. During the initial phase of the first campaign, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) — where the Chiefs were in attendance—the Defence Minister's Committee (DMC) and the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) functioned well, until the British Services Chiefs' contradictory allegiance — predictably, more towards British interests than the Indian armed

forces they were commanding — introduced strains. Unsurprisingly, the DCC gradually lost its value, as evidenced from Prime Minister (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru's written remarks to Defence Minister (DM) Baldev Singh: "There is no particular advantage in putting up the [defence] plans in the motley crowd that attends DCC meetings."[2] He was clearly alluding to the British Chiefs. And that, in effect, marked the end of the DCC as an apex level political-military interface.

Nehru's uneasy relationship with the British Commanders went to reinforce his strong liberal-intellectual predisposition and inborn apathy towards the armed forces. This trait persisted even after the Indian officers assumed top military leadership positions. His decision to drawdown force levels of the Army, against military advice, was unwise. As was his prejudice against the armed forces — barring his favourite, Lt Gen BM Kaul, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS). This became evident in the military action in Goa as also in the war against China a year later. Worse, VK Krishna Menon, DM during both military campaigns, was even more biased. He was rude, disdainful, authoritarian and arbitrary, showed utter contempt for rank and protocol, and took a peculiar delight in humiliating senior officers in the presence of their juniors — condemnable practices to which the top military leadership could have objected assertively and vociferously. This had a negative fallout on morale, political-military interfaces and higher defence management.

Menon's proclivities were to show up during the planning phase of the military action in Goa during August-November 1961. The DCC, DMC, COSC and Joint Planning Committee (JPC) were all kept out of the loop. He explicitly directed that the Air Force and Naval Chiefs were not to be consulted; they came into the picture much later. The question that remains unanswered is: why did the Services Chiefs not insist on their functioning within established joint planning structures, particularly when joint force application constituted the key?

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Constraints of space preclude citation of numerous instances in the run up to the India-China boundary crisis that started in 1959 and the subsequent war during which the Nehru-Menon duo went on to tear asunder the delicate politico-military fabric. They disregarded professional military advice; did not relate political strategies to military means; isolated the armed forces from decision-making; unduly interfered in military matters; skewed the vital command and control structure of the armed forces; overly relied on an ill-informed civil service; and, indulged in political favouritism, emblemised by Kaul's and Ministry of Defence (MoD) Joint Secretary HC Sarin's proximity and direct access to the PM. These adverse developments were to inevitably render the higher direction of war virtually disfunctional.

Nehru and Menon made critical decisions on higher defence in consultation only with select individuals. Contrarian military inputs were frowned upon. Significantly, Army Chief Thimayya's strong recommendation during the late 1950s on adoption of a dissuasive strategy which was supported by the Naval and Air Chiefs, and which involved an additional three divisions and other augmentations, was shelved as being "extravagant". Later, a timely and comprehensive COSC Paper of January 1961, which appraised the shortages in weapons, equipment and logistics support and pressed for these to be met to face the looming threat, was wilfully ignored. The Army Chief's many letters to the Defence Secretary during January-November 1961 drawing attention to the critical state of supplies, and the General Staff Paper of October 21 stipulating that the Army could not maintain the border outposts on the scale ordered also elicited no response. No effort was made to rectify these shortcomings and evaluate strategies for a comprehensive politico-diplomatic-military

posture towards China that best served India's interests. These offer lessons that are valid even today.

The DCC and DMC had no role in the adoption of the foredoomed "forward policy". As Neville Maxwell, quoting the post-war classified military appraisal made by Lt Gen Henderson Brooks and Brig Prem Bhagat, the so-termed Henderson Brooks Report, says, "Army HQ orders on establishment of penny packet forward posts in Ladakh, specifying their location and strength, were met with protests by Western Command that 'it lacked forces to carry out allotted tasks and still less to face the clearly foreseeable consequences'... adding the admonition that political directions be based on military means."[3] In Arunachal Pradesh, HQ 33 Corps echoed this line equally determinedly. The Army Chief is said to have agreed with these assessments but was overruled by Krishna Menon. But could not the armed forces leadership have been more assertive, demanded its voice be heard and strongly protested against unwarranted interference in military issues rather than toe the political line against its better professional judgement? This is a key lesson that finds contemporary relevance.

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At the political level, persistence of the misplaced belief that China was unlikely to invade without risking a wider war ensured that no thought was given to the prospect that China could launch a short, calibrated, punitive strike. And the Chinese leadership had exactly that option in mind, after ensuring that the US had no plans to militarily engage it through Taiwan and in timing the invasion with the Cuban missile crisis to keep the Soviets at bay. As to India, its China policy, ruling out a military threat from it, lay in ruins. With the exception of the Nasser-Tito

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duo, the non-aligned countries remained silent all through the month-long conflict. But the six-nation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)-initiated Colombo Proposals did provide a reasonable compromise with what was then termed "a tilt towards India".

Powerful sections of opposition in Parliament, instead of joining the government in evolving a consensus to face a looming national security crisis, trenchantly criticised Nehru for refusing to fight the Chinese and instead seeking a peaceful settlement of the boundary dispute. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, went so far as to taunt the PM rather cruelly "...land you have given away... what more will you give?"[4] These developments sharpened politico-diplomatic dilemmas, limited Nehru's wiggle room and further served to exacerbate the political-military disconnect.

How do civil-military relations, specifically their politico-interfaces, so important for higher defence management, fare today? One of the lessons well learnt by the political leadership, to later see maturation during the wars in 1965, 1971 and 1999, was the imperative to better understand military needs. But, effective political-civil service-armed forces synergy has yet to be fully institutionalised. It should be made mandatory for the Services Chiefs to attend the meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) that discuss and decide defence issues. While the key need for an integrated MoD is discussed subsequently, the existential DM's periodic meeting, usually held every month, must, in addition to the National Security Adviser (whenever called), have in attendance the Secretaries of ministries whose linkages with key defence issues are under discussion. This was the pattern during decades of the DM's morning meetings.

Problems also exist at the civil service end. Exceptions notwithstanding, the uninformed 'generalist' administrator, who takes or influences decisions, has inadequate knowledge on specialised defence issues and lacks the expertise to challenge the military on its logic or arbitrate between competing Service interests. This insufficiency in coping with the changing nature of conflict /challenge matrix, impact of nuclear weapons, rapid geo-political changes, managing transformational technologies and future force design and weapon-system mix has the potential not only to induce weaknesses in the Higher Defence Management (HDM) and defence preparedness, but cause an avoidable civil-military mistrust.

As PR Chari, a former Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, and Additional Secretary, Ministry of Defence, observed presciently, over three decades ago, "The civil service, if it has to serve as a key institution of the government would have no choice but specialise."[5] This perspective, long advocated by India's security community, has also found traction in the Naresh Chandra Task Force on the reform of the national security structures. Its 2012 report has proposed the creation of a special cadre of civil service defence specialists to ensure optimal knowledge build-up.

Reform is also called for at the armed forces end as the manifestations of the aforementioned rapid changes impact them even more tangibly. A Western scholar's perspective in the American context has relevance: "Ingrained anti-intellectualism, a predisposition for action over reflection, and a preference for the comforting simplicity of tactical and technical pursuits all contribute to a dearth of strategic thinking and advice by the military leadership."[6]

Intelligence

Looking back at 1962, very limited military intelligence led to a flawed threat assessment and related preparedness level in deployments, with an obvious adverse impact on the higher defence management. The inputs of BN Mullik, Director, Intelligence Bureau (IB), were more instinctive

advice than assessments anchored in rigorous analyses. In the words of the Henderson Brooks Report, "He, from beginning to end, proclaimed the avuncular truth that whatever Indians did, there need be no fear of a Chinese reaction."[7] In quoting Field Mshl Roberts, the Henderson Brooks Report is spot on: "The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy not coming, but in our own readiness to receive him; not on the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our position unassailable."[8]

Indian intelligence failed to assess the objectives and consequences of Chinese cross-boundary actions over a three-year period in both Ladakh and Arunachal before the invasion in 1962. The IB's own report of September 1961 confirming occupation of posts by the Chinese along their 1960 claim line was not followed up. Ominously, the strong reservations of two key formations, the HQ Western Command and HQ 33 Corps, on the "forward policy" that they were ordered to implement, should have merited a 'what if' analysis by the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), then under the COSC, rather than the Chiefs choosing to be meekly complicit with their arbitrary rejection at the political level.

Fifty years on, more so after the Kargil conflict which again brought out the severe disjunction between inadequate intelligence and higher defence management, robust capabilities have been built up. These include advanced satellite-, ground-, and sea-based surveillance and reconnaissance systems as also remotely piloted vehicles. The recommendations of the NC Saxena Task Force on intelligence reform have been largely implemented. The creation of the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) has also been a major step forward in communication and cyber-intelligence. But reform of the intelligence agencies, systems and coordination mechanisms is a continuous process that must continue.

The long-felt need for a Director, National Intelligence, on the lines of the US model, or in the alternative, Head, National Intelligence

Coordination merits consideration. The individual would enhance inter-agency coordination, so important in timely assessment and dissemination, eliminate avoidable overlaps and duplication and, thus, optimise utilisation of scarce resources. The proposal for legislations to lay down the mandate, tasks and functions of intelligence organisations and different tiers of accountability — executive and functional — appears sound. These would facilitate quality audits and assist in provision of even more focussed throughput. Induction of outside expertise from the scientific, technological and armed forces streams, as proposed in the foregoing for the civil service would likewise gainfully inform the national intelligence apparatus and higher defence management.

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Policy mavens need to stop stonewalling the security/academic community's related longstanding demand for access to decades-old 'classified' data locked in the concerned ministries/institutions. Specific to the war in 1962, Krishna Menon's decision that no minutes be kept of the conferences on military operations has handicapped researchers in scrutinising and analysing data to bring forth lessons for the future. Else, in George Santayana's famous words, "People's failure to learn past lessons will condemn them to repeat the course." It is time India's classified data policy on military issues is revisited with urgency.

Non-Employment of Combat Air Power

One of the principal lacunae in India's higher direction of war in 1962 was the non-employment of the combat power of the IAF, though its transport aircraft and helicopters undertook daring air supply missions against overwhelming odds. There is no authentic documentation on the thinking behind the decision to desist from employment of offensive air

support, but Jaswant Singh is spot on: "The biggest of Nehru's failures... was his failure to consult the Air Force in October-November 1962 and commit it to battle. There was corresponding failure on the part of...the Army Chief, who thought of a war against China as a strictly land war."[9]

To be sure, there was misapprehension — ascribed to American Ambassador JK Galbraith, BN Mullik and some others — that India's undefended cities would come under punishing attacks of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). It is intriguing why the IAF did not undertake a comprehensive assessment of the PLAAF air threat. This was the *raison d' etre* of its top leadership. Such an assessment would have also allayed the prevalent unfounded fears. But it is known that Nehru was against escalation of the crisis.

As revealed by Galbraith[10], Krishna Menon was in favour of full employment of the IAF, and so was Lt Gen BM Kaul, who as GOC 4 Corps, following the Chinese attack at Thagla on September 8, 1962, had urgently sought government sanction for employment of the IAF for offensive air support. Western Command and HQ 15 Corps had sought the same in Ladakh. Both requests were turned down, except for the fact that the Air Force was soon put on full alert. Providing a glimpse of the nature and tenor of the higher defence management of that time, there is no evidence to suggest that Nehru consulted the Air Chief before he despatched a desperate letter to President John Kennedy on November 19, 1962, requesting him to provide 12 US Air Force (USAF) F-104 fighter squadrons and two B-57 bomber squadrons, along with the aircrew, for India's defence. This, when the IAF combat aircraft had been on alert for over a month, but were not tasked.

A comparative evaluation of the PLAAF and IAF of that time would reveal that the latter, with over 300 state-of-the-art combat aircraft (Canberras, Hunters, Mysteres, Gnats, Toofanis and Vampires), had an edge in terms of quality of platforms, infrastructure and operating bases in the plains. Six PLAAF airfields in Xinjiang and Tibet, four of which were

at high altitudes, precluded operations by its MiG-15s and MiG-17s, that were no match for the IAF's frontline fighters. The MiG-19s and the lumbering IL-28 bombers could reach the northeastern towns but with very limited weapon load. It is mystifying why the top leadership of the Air Force of that time did not persuade the other components of the higher defence management to permit it to join the battle with offensive air support. Over four decades later, it took the gracious Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh to offer *mea culpa* on their behalf, with the words, "Had we done so (offensive air action)...I think the outcome would have been somewhat different."[11]

Integration and Armed Forces in Decision-Making

In the earlier narrative on political-military interfaces during the war in 1962, the political leadership's apathy towards the armed forces leadership assumed worrisome proportions for which India paid a heavy price. The larger matrix had multiple consequences. One, setting aside of established and institutionalised political-civil service-armed forces interfaces for the higher direction of war. Two, disregard of persistent written demands of the COSC/ Army HQ, over two years prior to the conflict, for meeting the Army's severe shortages in weapons, equipment and logistics. Three, absence of an integrated approach to evolve a politico-military and diplomatic posture towards China. Four, rejecting the professional military advice of the armed forces leadership at key decision points during the run-up to the war and its conduct phase. Last, but not least, deliberate isolation of the armed forces from decision-making related to defence.

Fifty years later, the above shortcomings persist in a myriad ways, because India has inflicted upon itself a higher defence decision-making model that negates synergy between the civilian and armed forces components of the national security and defence arena. The political leadership, civil service and armed forces function in water-tight verticals.

When the Kargil Committee Report (2000) proposed integration of the armed forces' headquarters with the MoD, the latter, through a sleight of hand, with celerity, renamed the former as "Integrated Headquarters of MoD" to create the mirage of 'integration', without delegation of administrative and financial powers to the armed forces Chiefs. Only the Army and Navy readily swallowed the bait! It is, thus, not surprising that the Standing Committee on Defence (2009) understandably described this renaming as being "merely cosmetic."

In a development with an encouraging hope of change, meaningful integration of the armed forces headquarters with the MoD, for long advocated by Parliament's Standing Committee for Defence, the security community and the defence and armed forces' think-tanks, has, at last, found some traction. The Naresh Chandra Task Force is said to have strongly endorsed this proposition, and recommended baby steps towards the purpose through cross-posting/staffing of officers up to Director/ equivalent over five years, followed by step-up to Joint Secretary.

In fairness to India's defence planners, the establishment of the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and defence acquisition bodies (for greater procurement transparency) have proved to be valuable initiatives towards ensuring greater synergies. But, within the IDS, there is a potential for greater integration in coordinated budgeting, employment and protection of space assets, cyber-information warfare, intelligence-sharing, electronics-communications, joint training, and logistics infrastructure. All these, however, constitute a long-haul. While the creation of the post of Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) is not said to have found favour with the Naresh Chandra Task Force, the recommended Permanent Chairman, COSC, could gainfully serve the intended purpose in the medium term, subject, of course, to prior attainment of full-fledged integration of Services HQ with the MoD.

In this day and age, perhaps the simpler, easy-on-the tongue designation, Chief of the Joint Staff (CJS), would find greater

institutional and public acceptance, even as the post would, *de facto*, be Permanent Chairman, COSC. The lingering question remains: how would the civil service institutionally respond to full-fledged integration? The Naresh Chandra Task Force, not moving beyond the baby steps of proposing cross-postings/ staffing partly provides a glimpse of the apprehension that the DNA of the civil service would ensure its foot dragging on the long-overdue full integration. That brings in the larger question of whether effective political scrutiny and monitoring of ongoing defence modernisation and reform of higher defence management, including integration, would not be best served through the establishment of a Defence Review Commission (DRC). Configured on the lines of the decadal Central Pay Commission, the DRC could be primarily vested with the mandate to undertake a decadal review of India's defence strategy and defence posture, along with the related capabilities needed to safeguard and project its national interests in a complex and challenging security environment.

Out-of-country contingencies, boots-on-the-ground scenarios, maritime security, oceanic long-reach air power, air/sea lift, energy and trade flow security and diaspora-protection, etc, all warrant the rigour of a comprehensive net assessment.

The absence of political-foreign service-armed forces synergies in higher defence management has also long persisted. There are no institutional consultative or organisational structures for coordination of defence and foreign policies between the MoD and Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on a regular basis. Nor have vacancies earmarked for the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in the IDS been ever filled. Consequently, the applications segment of the role of the armed forces in shaping a growing India's strategic neighbourhood receives little attention. The unaddressed lingering question is: what kind of

architecture and military force design would India require to safeguard and project its national interests "from Hindu Kush to Irrawady, Aden to Singapore and Suez to Shanghai?" Evidently, thrust areas would include out-of-country contingencies, boots-on-the-ground scenarios, maritime security, oceanic long-reach air power, air/sea lift, energy and trade flow security and diaspora-protection, etc, all of which warrant the rigour of a comprehensive net assessment.

Additionally, without adequate attention to closer military-to-military ties with friendly countries and placement of these intense conversations on a more professional and institutional long-term basis, India's policies could face hiccups. Nor can the government's reported long-delayed plan to expand the Indian Foreign Service from about 700 or so to 1,800 by 2018 succeed without its specialisation and induction of outside expertise. An incremental plan could plug-in knowhow and skill sets from the armed forces and their think-tanks, academia, intelligence, technological community, private trade/commercial sector on short service or contracts. Inevitably, this does not resonate with the purists among current and former diplomats. But their resistance appears more like the World War II case, when the Polish armed forces deployed their prized cavalry to face the impending onslaught of German tanks poised on the outskirts of Warsaw.

Lastly, the security community's longstanding espousal of the need for an international security/strategic affairs division in the MoD seems to have found acceptance by the Naresh Chandra Task Force, though it favours the more high-sounding nomenclature, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. The bureau, to be staffed by armed forces officers, and to be headed by a Joint Secretary, would have the mandate to liaise with the MEA on issues and initiatives having foreign policy applications and consequences. It is to be hoped that the issues and concerns addressed in this paper, and the recommendations made, with regard to India's higher defence management, based on the lessons of the war in 1962, would see

implementation at a greater administrative velocity than the government has so far demonstrated.

Notes

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6. Gregory D Foster, "The Precarious State of US Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces Journal*, August 2007, p. 4.
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