Complexities of National Security Decision-Making Process

V P Malik

In no other major democracy are the armed forces given so insignificant a role in policy-making as in India. In no other country do they accept it with the docility they do in India.

— Shekhar Gupta, Editor-in-Chief
The Indian Express

The military's isolation from India's political leadership is perhaps its only negative contribution to the Indian democracy.

— Anonymous

Introduction

India's defence and security report card for the past six decades plus has been more positive than negative. Despite a weak strategic culture and 'reactive' strategic policies, ad hoc defence planning, intelligence failures, and strategic and tactical surprises, the armed forces have maintained India's security and territorial integrity better than any other democratic, developing nation in the world. But the credit for these successes goes less to the strategic foresight or higher direction of war, and more to those responsible for operational planning and its execution on the ground. Many a time, we have failed to convert hard-won operational achievements into long-term politico-strategic successes.

The national security decision-making process can be examined in two parts: (a) How does it work? (b) Do we get the quality of decisions? If not, why

General **V P Malik** (Retd) is former Chief of Army Staff, India.

> **Despite a weak strategic culture and 'reactive' strategic policies, ad hoc defence planning, intelligence failures, and strategic and tactical surprises, the armed forces have maintained India's security and territorial integrity better than any other democratic, developing nation in the world.**

not? This process can also be placed into two distinct situations: peace-time, and in time of war or war-like situations. At the outset, however, it must be emphasised that the process is heavily impacted by inter-personal relations and rapport amongst civilian and military executives and the political leadership. In the last part of the paper, I convey my thoughts on the urgent need to review this process, keeping in view the changed strategic and operational environment.

Higher Defence Control Organisation

It is not possible to discuss the 'national security decision-making process', unless we refresh our minds about how the existing 'higher defence control organisation' got evolved.

When India became independent, we adopted the politico-military establishment blueprint as recommended by Lord Ismay, then Chief of Staff, with Lord Mountbatten. Ismay suggested a Defence Department with a series of committees to ensure an integrated functioning of defence. These committees were:

- **Defence Committee of the Cabinet:** The Defence Committee of the Cabinet comprising the prime minister and certain selected ministers, including the defence minister, with the three Service chiefs, the defence secretary and the financial adviser in attendance.
- **Defence Minister's Committee:** The Defence Minister's Committee comprising the defence minister, Service chiefs, defence secretary and the financial adviser.
- **Chiefs of Staff Committee:** This committee was already in existence under the Defence Committee of the Cabinet. It had a rotating chairman on the basis of longest tenure in the committee, irrespective of relative rank. The Chief of Defence Staff was not recommended. *(In a letter to Lt Gen M C Chibber, former Army Commander, Northern Command, Lord Mountbatten wrote later that he wanted to propose this appointment before leaving the country but could not do it.)*

Secretarial support for all these committees, including the Defence Committee of the Cabinet, was provided by a Military Wing set up in the Cabinet Secretariat. The idea was to facilitate prompt decision-making on defence issues, good coordination, and provide direct interface between the military leaders and the highest political and executive authority of the government.

Some significant developments that took place thereafter were:

- In 1952, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) published a document titled "Organisation, Functions, Powers and Procedures of Defence Headquarters, 1952." This document stated that the status of the Armed Forces Headquarters "corresponds to that of an attached office of the secretariat of the civil side." The Service Chiefs raised strong objections. But almost all objections were overruled. In March 1955, the government changed the designation of the Service chiefs from commander-in-chief to chief of staff of their respective Service.

- In 1962, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet was redesignated as the Emergency Committee of the Cabinet; later, as the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA), and much later, as the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). The Service chiefs used to attend meetings of the Defence Committee. But since the CCPA and CCS dealt with other matters besides defence, the chiefs were asked to attend only 'as and when required'. As a result, some prime ministers called them more often, while others very nearly forgot them. (In 1979, when the CCPA discussed the morale of military officers, only the defence secretary was present. The Service chiefs were not invited. Even when defence plans were discussed, the Service chiefs were excluded from the Cabinet meetings.)

- A system of the raksha mantri's (RM's) morning meeting was introduced in 1962. This dealt a death blow to the Defence Minister's Committee, which had a formal agenda and papers for consideration before the meeting, prior to decisions being taken.

- In 1990, a National Security Council (NSC) was set up under the prime minister with a few Cabinet ministers, and provision for chief ministers of states to be coopted as required. The NSC composition was later reviewed. Besides the national security adviser (NSA), the NSC now has the ministers of defence, external affairs, home, finance, and the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission. Others can be invited to attend, as and when required. The three-tiered organisation of the NSC comprises the Strategic Policy Group, the National Security Advisory Board, and

> **The defence planning process was handicapped by the absence of a national security doctrine.**

a Secretariat. The Strategic Policy Group is the first level of the three-tier organisation. It forms the nucleus of the decision-making apparatus of the NSC but does not meet regularly. The NSA is supposed to be the principal cocoordinator for formulation and implementation of long-term national security policies under the overall guidance of the prime minister and the NSC. He is the long-term strategic security planner. Also, as per India's nuclear doctrine, the NSA heads the Executive Council of the Nuclear Command Authority and monitors the preparedness of the country's strategic forces to respond in accordance with the approved nuclear doctrine.

- In 1998, the Defence Minister's Committee was revived after 24 years, but only for a few meetings before reverting to the RM's morning meetings. Meanwhile, the secretarial function was transferred from the Military Wing to the joint secretary [(JS) (P&C)], thus, effectively ending any Services influence over its agenda or functioning.

Post-Kargil War Reforms

After the Kargil War, the government realised that the whole security apparatus required changes. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) Report had brought out several grave deficiencies in the security management system. Its recommendations led to the setting up of a Group of Ministers (GoM) Committee, which observed that "there is a marked difference in the perception and crisis of confidence among civil and military officials within the MoD and Services Headquarters (HQ) regarding their respective roles and functions." There was also lack of synchronisation among and between the three departments in the MoD, including the relevant elements of Defence Finance. The concept of 'attached offices' as applicable to Services Headquarters; problems of *inter-se* relativities; multiple, duplicated, and complex procedures governing the exercise of administrative and financial powers, and the concept of 'advice' to the minister—all these had contributed to the problems.

The GoM also observed that the Chief of Staff Committee (COSC) had serious weaknesses in its ability to provide single-point military advice to the government, and to resolve substantive inter-Service doctrinal, planning, policy and operational issues. This institution needed to be restructured to discharge

its responsibilities efficiently, including the facilitation of 'jointness' and synergy. Some other important comments were:

- The defence planning process was handicapped by the absence of a national security doctrine. It suffered from lack of a holistic approach. The planning was competitive and uneconomical.
- The system governing defence acquisitions suffered from lack of integrated planning, weaknesses in linkages between plans and budgets, cumbersome administrative, technical and financial evaluation procedures, and absence of a dedicated, professionally equipped common procurement structure within the MoD.
- There was no synergy between academic research and the government's security policy requirements. Both functioned without any linkages.

The GoM recommended appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in the Ministry of Defence to (a) provide single-point military advice; (b) hold administrative control over, and manage, the strategic forces; (c) ensure intra-Service and inter-Service prioritisation of the 10 and 15-year 'perspective plans', and also the five-year defence plans; and (d) bring about improvement in the 'jointness' among various units of the armed forces. The CDS was also expected to work for the improvement in the uniformity of training in the three Services and to reduce any 'overlap' and 'replication' in them.

Since then, we have created an Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) but by keeping it headless, it has not been able to deliver the desired integrated and joint paradigm. In the absence of a CDS, the existing military structures continue to be based essentially on the concept of single Service management. Each Service Headquarters does its independent planning and management of matters relating to its own Service. Coordination in matters like military operations, intelligence, logistics, and technology has improved to some extent, but there is limited 'combined' military strategic planning in the MoD.

Peace-Time Decision-Making

In peace-time, most of the decision-making is institutional. It involves the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Defence Minister's Morning Meetings, and Cabinet Committee on Security or the National Security Council, and other committees mentioned earlier.

The weakness and difficulties of integrated policy initiatives and discussions in the COSC, the very informal nature of discussions in the RM's Morning

Meetings in which no agendas or minutes are issued, and the chiefs not being able to attend all security related meetings of the CCS (even when important security issues and defence preparedness are discussed) and, thus, being in the loop—all this tends to make this process difficult, unbearably slow, and often frustrating.

Proposals are initiated by the Service HQ or in the MoD, briefly discussed in the committees mentioned earlier or in separate meetings and then submitted on the file. This file, thereafter, goes through repeated examinations and clarifications. Even after a five-year defence plan has been approved by the CCS—which does not happen often—every case for procurement has to be processed individually all over again. The pace and the progress of the files depend upon the experience and mindset of the officers—the civilian and military bureaucrats. If someone agrees with the proposal, the file will continue to meander through the corridors. And if a person does not like the proposal, he or she can scuttle it; consign it to a deep hole in a cupboard or send it back with some frivolous query. The military staffs, when alert, or alerted, try to keep track of the file. When they fail, the matter is raised within the Service HQ. Almost 70-75 per cent of a chief's time and tenure is spent in trying to pursue such issues. The disadvantages of such a process and its adverse impact on defence capabilities, preparedness and morale can be easily imagined. This process also creates unnecessary tension and mistrust between civil and military bureaucracies within the government.

Decision-Making During War

The situation changes completely when a war is on or a crisis situation involving the military is on the agenda. Everyone then has ears for the chiefs and their principal staff. There is speed and energy in the decision-making and very few queries. However, the problem is that it is not possible to build or enhance capabilities during such a situation. Most of the time, the armed forces have to make do with whatever they have. That, indeed, was a major difference in the planning and conduct of the war in 1971 and those fought in 1965 and 1999.

Let me narrate the experience of the Kargil War management. In the initial stages when we had no information and were completely surprised, the approach was, 'nothing unusual: throw out the infiltrators as we have been doing every day in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).' Due to lack of information and with all intelligence agencies harping on infiltration by 'Mujahideen terrorists', the COSC could not agree on the fuller employment of the air force. The CCS also declined permission for this measure.

I visited Udhampur and Srinagar (could not go to Kargil due to bad weather) immediately on my return from abroad and was briefed on the ground situation. The situation was then reviewed in the COSC and we arrived at a consensus and decided to work on a 'combined' military strategy. As chairman, COSC, I gave our assessment and recommendations to the CCS on May 24. We recommended the need to gain strategic initiative in order to facilitate operations of 15 Corps and the Northern Command. Also, that we had to be prepared for war escalation either by Pakistan or by us and in such a situation, all three Services would have to be prepared and act cohesively. The COSC sought permission for the use of air power and the deployment of the navy. The CCS approved the proposal and asked that the intrusion be cleared at the earliest but laid down that the Line of Control (LoC) or the border should not be crossed. Thereafter, we conveyed the military strategy to our staff. The objective was to pose a credible military threat to Pakistan on the entire western front and, thus, ease pressure in the Kargil sector. The offensive across the LoC or the border, if necessary, would be taken after taking permission from the CCS. Thereafter, everyone was closely enmeshed in the politico-military decision-making process.

The CCS would meet on a daily basis till the second week of July 1999. Besides the prime minister and other CCS members, the meetings were attended by the national security adviser, the Cabinet secretary, the three Service chiefs, the secretaries of the Defence, Home, Finance and External Affairs Ministries, heads of the Intelligence Bureau and Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), and the secretary, National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS). Sometimes, for some specific purposes, special invitees were also called in. The prime minister would be flanked by other CCS members, the national security adviser and the Cabinet secretary on one side of the table. I would sit opposite the prime minister along with my Services colleagues, other secretaries and executive heads of departments.

The meetings would generally begin with the heads of the intelligence agencies giving fresh information or follow-up results. The Service chiefs would then brief the participants by providing details of the previous day's operations and envisaged plans that required CCS clearance or coordination. All politico-military-diplomatic aspects were considered and discussed. The international environment was monitored continuously. The foreign secretary gave his briefing on our diplomatic initiatives and reactions from different countries. The home secretary provided information on the domestic political and law and order situation. The defence and finance secretaries noted envisaged

> **The separation among the tactical, operational and strategic levels of warfare is blurring. It is a situation wherein a junior military officer is expected to understand political considerations, and the political leader to know the tactical and operational considerations.**

procurements, movements of troops and material, and any other actions that had major financial implications or required procedural clearances. There was complete synergy and consensus among various organs of the government—from political direction to execution in the field, and to proactive diplomacy.

It was a refreshing change in the decision-making process, at the political as well as armed forces level: open and direct. The political leadership received the views of the Service chiefs first-hand. After discussions, the concerned executive authorities, including the three chiefs, received directions from the prime minister. The National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra, who was always accessible and a very effective troubleshooter, facilitated this process. All these developments led to a very integrated approach to 'war management' with the political, economic, diplomatic, media and military aspects meshed together cogently.

At the level of the armed forces, regular military briefings were carried out in the Military Operations Room daily. Besides the three chiefs, representatives of the Ministries of Defence, External Affairs, Home and the intelligence agencies attended these briefings. Officers from operational directorates of all three Services nominated to brief the media along with the joint secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs would also attend sometimes. The daily briefings were followed by an 'in-house' discussion on a 'need-to-know' basis. During the course of the war, the Service chiefs briefed the president of India (twice), vice president (once), all governors and chief ministers (once), and an all-party meeting in the Parliament House on the progress of operations.

At one stage, in consultation with the NSA, we prepared a list of essential weapons and equipment required urgently by each Service, and sent it across to the MoD. We were assured that the material would be procured within two to three months. But we received no imported material during the war.

Military Functioning in the Current Strategic Environment

The end of the Cold War has led to a new era in global security and the nature

of conflict and warfare. While conventional war as an instrument of foreign policy has become increasingly unviable, sub-conventional conflicts have become more prevalent. Thus, there is a greater likelihood of limited or restricted conflicts and wars in the future than those of the Clausewitzian concept of all out wars. It may also be noted that in the current strategic environment, wars when they do occur, may no longer be taken to the logical conclusion of military victories, as was the case in the past. They would be conducted with the objective of achieving political successes rather than a military victory. Even the USA could not achieve a total victory in the Gulf Wars or in Kosovo. Something similar is happening in Libya. In the Kargil War too, the political aim and terms of reference prevented the military from escalating the conflict or crossing the LoC.

> **It is, therefore, essential to keep the military leadership in the security and strategic decision-making loop, and having a direct politico-military interface.**

In this strategic environment, the separation among the tactical, operational and strategic levels of warfare is blurring. While there was always some degree of overlap among these levels, due to the increasingly pervasive influence of information technology (IT) on warfare, this overlap has now increased. Enhanced mobility, long reaches in targeting and effective command and control have obscured tactical and strategic boundaries. A small military action along the LoC, or a terrorists' act in the hinterland, tends to become an issue for consideration and decision-making at the strategic level. *It is a situation wherein a junior military officer is expected to understand political considerations, and the political leader to know the tactical and operational considerations.*

The major political and military objectives, the likely duration of the war or the time available to the armed forces to execute their missions and achieve politico-military goals, would be crucial for their planning and conduct of operations. This is something on which there would have to be complete understanding between the political and military leadership. We can also expect fairly rigid political terms of reference as were given during the Kargil War.

In such a war scenario, politico-diplomatic factors will play an important role. Careful and calibrated orchestration of military operations, diplomacy, and domestic political environment is essential for its successful outcome. Continuous control of the 'escalatory ladder' requires much closer political

oversight and politico- civil- military interaction. It is, therefore, essential to keep the military leadership in the security and strategic decision-making loop, and having a direct politico-military interface.

Some important challenges, which are more likely to be encountered by our country, are:

- The political definition of the goals and its translation into military objectives is always difficult. Sometimes it is uncertain and indirect. Yet its success is truly critical for the attainment of the political goals. The key military concepts pertaining to the desired end result such as decisive victory and success are fundamentally transformed to reflect a much heavier political emphasis and attributes.
- The successful outcome of such a war hinges on the ability to react rapidly to an evolving crisis, which often erupts with surprise. This is a major challenge for the military. For the military is expected to be able to react quickly to the changing circumstances to arrest the deterioration, enhance deterrence, and diminish incentives for escalation.
- Mobilising, and sustaining, domestic and international political support for military operations would depend upon the ability of the military to operate in a manner that conforms to political legitimacy e.g. avoidance of civilian and military casualties on both sides and minimisation of collateral damage.
- Militarily, the greatest challenge could be in the political reluctance to commit a proactive engagement, and its insistence to retain the authority for approving not just key military moves, but also many operational decisions.
- There would be heavy reliance on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) for target selection. Surgical strikes would be a common option. Air power, precision guided weapons and stand-off armaments would be the weapons of choice. Employment of ground forces across the borders could be discouraged, or delayed, due to fear of casualties and difficulty in disengagement at will.
- Information operations are important due to the growing transparency of the battlefield to the public via the media and the internet. The political requirements of the military operations, in order to achieve and retain the moral high ground and deny it to the adversary, would need a comprehensive and sophisticated media, public affairs and information campaign. This has to be fully integrated and synchronised with the planning and execution of the military operations.

Military Advice and Required Structure and Process

This leads me to ask: are we getting the required advice from our military? Do we have the right higher defence control system and processes for this purpose?

Every nation requires strategically effective (not just militarily effective) advice to the civilian authorities who are representative of, and answerable to, the Parliament and a vibrant civil society. The general impression is that in India, the military leaders are not in a position to provide such strategically sound advice to the political leadership. This impression seems valid when we ask ourselves:

Does our military demonstrate critical, creative understanding of the strategic purposes? Does it contribute in strategic level discussions, and explain the consequences of military employment and institutional conduct? Is it giving such advice regularly?

Does it demonstrate a willingness to speak up (and, when necessary, speak out), especially in opposition to strategically flawed policies, initiatives and measures?

Are our military leaders (at all levels) civically literate and conversant with the principles and precepts expressed and implied in the Constitution?

Are the civilian authorities who oversee the military strategically competent? Do we have the correct civilian supremacy and oversight of the military or is it very substantially through a bureaucratic proxy?

Do our civilian authorities—executive and legislative—adequately demonstrate critical understanding of the larger strategic issues, and implications of military employment and institutional conduct? Are they adequately conversant with military purposes, capabilities, constraints and effects?

I leave it to the reader to answer all these questions.

Conclusion

War, as Clausewitz noted aptly, has always been a continuation of politics by other means. Recent wars have involved a much greater level of integration of politics and military planning and execution. Even when a decision to employ the military is made, the political leadership seldom allows autonomous conduct of the war to the military. It tends to reassert its authority for final conflict resolution, as soon as military operations are over. In practice, there is a continuing erosion of the dividing lines between war and politics.

Higher direction of war in the current strategic environment is too vital a subject to be dealt with in watertight compartments. It is imperative that we change our mindset and attitudes and look beyond the narrow boundaries

defined by turf and parochialism. Keeping in view the fast changing strategic environment and trends in warfare, there is an urgent requirement to review our higher defence control system. We need changes in the structures, processes, and procedures that would make it more efficient, resilient, and, most importantly, speedily responsive. It is only then that we can be secure internally and externally, fully prepared to take on the role that we see for ourselves as a regional power.

BLAZING SKIES

KONARK AIR DEFENCE BRIGADE

'Blazing skies' symbolises the spirit of the valiant air defence gunners displayed during 1965 & 1971 Indo-Pak wars, who with their l-60 guns engaged the enemy aircrafts and blazed the skies, proving their skills and will to safeguard the nation.

Both BHM Babu Mali and NK Dhondi Ram Bansode were awarded Vir Chakra for shooting down F-86 Sabre jet and F-104 Star Fighter over Dwarka and Okha.

The motto is a source of inspiration to the entire 'Konark air defence brigade family' to continue striving hard to excel in the future as well.