
Civil-Military Relations in India: Difficult Times

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The disparity in thinking between the armed forces and the Indian government over the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations took a new turn recently when the Army and Navy Headquarters (HQ) issued letters to their subordinates explaining the delay in the implementation of the revised salaries till the pay anomalies are sorted out. Some media analysts were quick to point out that the armed forces cannot unilaterally decide not to implement the decision of the Union Cabinet. Though the defence minister took pains to clarify that there were no differences with the Service chiefs, some sections of the media pointed out that the government is within its right to see the sending out of unclassified signals by the navy and army as a breach of discipline, with the some serious broader ramifications.

Though it might be tempting to view the present turmoil in civil-military relations primarily as a dispute over some technicalities in the Pay Commission recommendations, it needs to be examined whether something much more substantial is at stake. The navy chief suggested that the real issue in the dispute is the command and control relationship between the officers of the armed forces and their civilian counterparts. 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 at risk their national security.

A state makes a sacred contract with its soldiers that while he/she will lay down his/her life when called upon to do so, the nation will take good care of

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his/her and his/her family's needs to the extent its resources would permit. This contract underpins the very survival of a nation as, when its territorial integrity and political independence are under threat, the nation looks upon the only instrument that can protect it — its armed forces. While all governments have to look for a considered bargain between their commitments and power and between power and resources, a responsible government will always be aware of the serious implications of not spending adequate resources on defence.

The debate as it has been made out to be in some quarters between defence and development is a spurious one. Unless adequate provisions are made for defence, no state will be able to pursue its developmental agenda. This is much more important for a country like India that faces a unique security environment with two of its 'adversaries' straddling it on two sides of its borders, problems on all sides of its periphery, and rising internal turmoil. Force remains the *ultima ratio* in international relations. 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. Even Nehru, after neglecting defence for all the years after independence, had to eventually concede in 1962 that India's military weakness "has been a temptation, and a little military strength may be a deterrent."

The Indian society, meanwhile, remains apathetic on defence issues. It makes Kargil into a television spectacle, an opportunity for journalists to try to show off their temporary bravery by going to the frontlines for a few hours and getting the excitement 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 – to our song and dance reality shows and *saas-bahu* sagas, oblivious to the everyday struggles of the nation's soldiers on the frontlines.

Ignored by the larger society and by the state, the Indian armed forces today are witnessing unprecedented turmoil and dissatisfaction. The discontent over the Pay Commission recommendations is just one of the manifestations of this chaos. The armed forces feel they have never got their due from various Pay Commissions over the years but the government in its wisdom decided to keep the armed forces away from any representation in the latest Pay Commission. The dominance of bureaucrats meant that while the interests of the bureaucrats were well-recognised, the armed Services once again ended up getting a raw deal. The discontent is so serious that some of the best and brightest in our Services have refused to go for the Higher Command Course and more and

more are seeking an early retirement. Such turmoil within the ranks of any nation's armed Services should be a cause for concern but in the case of India that aspires to join the ranks of the world's major global powers this may become a recipe for trouble.

There is a broader issue here about the Indian military's growing disdain for their civilian masters and about their knowledge of defence issues. The Indian political class lacks any substantive understanding of the role of force in the pursuit of national interests and projecting national values. Moreover, no independent civilian expertise on defence issues is present in India. One can find students writing their PhD theses on Mongolia's foreign policy or domestic politics in Belize but hardly any research is encouraged on defence-related issues in Indian universities. As a result, one finds ex-Servicemen monopolising the discourse on national security and defence issues. They should certainly have an important voice on these matters but it should not be the only one.

Yet it is not entirely clear if the top leadership of the armed forces is really up to the task of harmonising the growing imbalance in civil-military relations. With their recent overtures to the government, the military chiefs have merely tried to cover their flanks, given the overwhelming resentment within their rank and file against the Pay Commission recommendations. While the Indian armed forces have often complained of the politico-bureaucratic nexus thwarting the rights of the defence Services, the behaviour of the top leadership of the armed Services is in danger of being perceived as being increasingly bureaucratic itself.

Blaming the government for all the ills afflicting the defence sector seems to have become the default position within the ranks of the military and taking this too far can be harmful for the liberal democratic ethos of this nation. The state is responsible for the allocation of resources among important societal sectors of which military security is but one. Moreover, the Indian armed forces need fundamental reforms, a restructuring that enables them to operate with utmost efficiency in a rapidly evolving domestic and global context. Amid all the hoopla surrounding the Pay Commission, it is important to remember that India is losing precious time by continuing with a defence policy that remains mired in

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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 military leadership has shied away from making tough choices about reducing the manpower strength; about adjusting the inter-Service budgetary balance; and about restructuring the nation's professional military education system. No military anywhere in the world deems the resources from its government as adequate, but an effective military organisation should be able to optimise the use of whatever is at its disposal. Resources alone, however, 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 ago by the armed forces themselves.

The questions that need to be debated and answered include: do we have a 21st century military in terms of doctrine and force structure? Have the doctrines and force structures evolved in line with the equipment that the nation's resources are being spent on? Do India's command and control processes reflect the changing strategic and operational requirements? Does the Indian military have the capacity to initiate military action at 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 2001-02 but could not? Have the Indian armed forces got the balance between capital and labour right?

Though high rates of economic growth have given and will in the future, provide, greater resources for defence, the changing socio-economic milieu will also make it increasingly difficult to attract young men and women to the Services. As a result, the armed forces will have to find a way to strike a balance between growing manpower shortage and the easing of budgetary constraints. The Services have no option but to modernise their human resources policy – recruitment, retention, promotions, exit *et al* which will make a huge difference to the satisfaction levels of the rank and file.

The armed forces need to do some serious introspection if these issues are to be sorted out before it is too late. It is disappointing to see the Service Headquarters continuing to resist greater integration and inter-Services rivalry continuing to be as vicious as in the past. When the army came up with the doctrine of *cold start*, it found no support for it in the other Services. The other Services may have had genuine concerns about the doctrine but they appear to

have made no attempt to reconcile their differences, underlining Indian operational weaknesses.

The government, meanwhile, can always point to the malaise within the armed forces as an excuse for not undertaking any meaningful defence reforms of its own. India, for example, finds itself in a peculiar position of having a Strategic Forces Command but no chief of Defence Staff (CDS), partly because of the differences among the three Services. The debate has got stuck on the issue of the CDS whereas the nation needs to be thinking seriously about integrated Theatre Commands, allowing the three Services to share their resources and enabling a reduction of manpower at various levels. Today's military challenges cannot be tackled without real integration up to the command level.

“War is an ugly thing,” wrote John Stuart Mill, “but not the ugliest of things.” Far worse, he suggested is the feeling that nothing in life is worth fighting for. No one understands this better than a soldier and no one lacks this awareness more than Indian policy-makers. 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 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.

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