



Civil-Military Relations in India: Questions and Concerns

by Ayesha Ray

Interaction between civilians and the military constitutes a critical as well as controversial relationship in any country, whether democracy or dictatorship. Ideally, civilians and the military from two distinct domains, each with a specific set of functions. While the decision to go to war is made by the political establishment, the military is responsible for the actual conduct of war on the battlefield.¹ Yet this relationship is not as simple as it appears at first glance. There often emerge situations in which the traditional division of labor between civilians and the military becomes blurred.² These situations may range from differences in the nature of a country's political system to the type of external threat facing a

country. As a consequence, the strict dichotomous relationship between civilians and the military can move towards either giving civilians or the military greater control over decisions of war.

I. National Security, Military Strategy and the Role of Civilians

a). The Emergence of an Indian Nuclear Doctrine: Dominance by Civilians

The motivation behind the conduct of India's very first set of nuclear tests in 1974 was primarily political. At no point was any concrete thought given to the way in which the armed forces might be allowed to respond to a situation in which the possibility of the use of these weapons arose. The Indian armed force seemed less enthusiastic about a nuclear India than their civilian counterparts. Some authors argue that given the development of a nuclear weapons program, the military would lose considerable degree of power because the actual use of counter-

¹ Karl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Princeton University Press, 1976.

² This has been referred to as the "civil-military problematique" by Peter Feaver who argues that there is an underlying tension between what civilians want and what the military wants. Sometimes maintaining a balance between the two becomes quite difficult and may give rise to a conflictual relationship between what civilians and the military. This problem has been elaborated in Feaver's "The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz and the Question of Civilian Control", *Armed Forces and Society*, 23(2), 1997.

value weapons is “more political than military”.³ Nuclear weapons work as instruments of policy and the threat of using nuclear weapons can be used by the political statesman to extract concessions on a disputed issue.

During the 1970s, civilians retained control over the use of these weapons. However, doubts were raised within the military establishment about the development of a nuclear arsenal and the potential use of these weapons. The former Commander in Chief of the Indian Army, General Cariappa is believed to have made the following observation with regard to India’s decision to weaponize. The General stated that “it will be suicidal on our part to go nuclear as such a move will shatter our economy and jeopardize our development plans”.⁴ This traditional mindset of the Indian military began to change from the 1980s when one of India’s finest military generals and strategic thinkers, General K. Sundarji championed the case for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Sundarji in his book, *Blind Men of Hindoostan* claimed that “the really big secret is that India had no coherent nuclear weapons policy and worse still did not even have an institutionalized system for analyzing and throwing up policy options in this regard”.⁵ Along with General Sundarji, there was growing discontent among military officers regarding the absence of a coherent nuclear doctrine and the necessary infrastructure required to support such a program. In 1985, a committee consisting of military personnel was set up to evaluate various nuclear weapons options. This committee produced a report recommending that India build a minimal nuclear deterrent force guided by a doctrine of “no-first use” aimed at retaliation only. However, the recommendations of this committee were never made public and the civilian leadership under Rajiv Gandhi continued to keep the military away from the purview of such

decisions. Hence, till the mid 90s, India’s nuclear strategy remained shrouded in ambiguity. The military was also not allowed to participate in the decision to develop these weapons.

The conduct of Indian nuclear tests in the summer of 1998 and the country’s overt nuclearization raised major questions regarding the command and control of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the Pakistani nuclear tests significantly impacted the extent to which Indian political leaders and the military were forced to think about the potential use of such weapons. Three major aspects of civil-military interaction in the sphere of nuclear weapons are strategy, force structure and operations. Political decisions regarding strategy and force structure are made based on military advice.⁶ With specific regard to nuclear weapons, decisions affecting targeting, deployment and the state of alert are all military decisions and best left to the military. Thus, a number of questions dealing with the actual use and deployment of these weapons require further scrutiny.

Since 1998 and until very recently, in contrast to the 1970s, the military has frequently voiced its concern over playing a stronger role in the decisions to use these weapons. Civilians too are gradually recognizing the need to impart some training to the military decisions of nuclear strategy particularly because of the latter’s expertise and competence in the area. In January 2003, Air Marshal T.M. Asthana was named the Commander in Chief of the Strategic Forces (SFC); the official body responsible for the administration of nuclear forces. Soon after, the Chairman, Chief of Staffs Committee (CoSC), Madhavendra Singh in an interview with a leading Indian daily claimed that “the training in nuclear weapons and their delivery as well as their servicing would remain the work of individual services.”⁷ Although such developments mark a transition towards a greater role of the armed

³ Chris Smith, *India’s Ad-Hoc Arsenal: Direction and Drift in Defense Policy?* Oxford University Press, 1994, p.189.

⁴ Quoted in George Perkovich, *India’s Nuclear Bomb*, University of California Press, 2001, p.152.

⁵ General Sundarji, *Blind Men of Hindoostan*, UBS Publishers, 1993.

⁶ Gurmeet Kanwal, *Nuclear Defense: Shaping the Arsenal*, Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, 2001.

⁷ Singh’s interview in one of India’s daily newspapers, *The Hindustan Times*, January 2003.

forces in decisions of nuclear strategy, it simultaneously raises questions about the division of labor between civilians and the military. India's nuclear doctrine consequently raises questions about the command and control structures that brings me to the next section.

b). Nuclear Command and Control

In the words of Shaun Gregory, “the primary dilemma facing civilians is to “militarize” a nuclear posture which is dominated by the government and the civilian organizations to ensure that the military is fully integrated in the nuclear decision making and fully functional operationally.⁸ How should the civilians go about doing this? In this regard, there is a need to address the question of where the inputs of the DCC or the Cabinet Committee on National Security should come from. These inputs must be a combination of both political and military decisions. Thus the military must get inevitably drawn in at the lower levels of the national command and control structure. According to Jasjit Singh, the Defence Minister's Committee (DMC) should be revamped with well defined roles for strategic planning and the management of nuclear weapons. Below the ministerial level, the military should be involved because specific military planning and strategies necessitate a greater military influence owing to the latter's expertise in the matter.⁹ The Nuclear Planning Group should be made responsible for framing a detailed targeting policy. In terms of operational command and control, the control of the nuclear arsenal should remain with the COSC. Since the combat aircraft remains the primary delivery vehicle, the IAF infrastructure should provide a base for implementing a strategy to operate the nuclear strike component from widely dispersed sites. Singh recommends that the Indian government would benefit from establishing a clearly demarcated military facility within the

Department of Atomic Energy so that warhead construction and maintenance can be linked to the military side without interfering with the civilian program for peaceful purposes. Moreover, the Indian Army should maintain control over warheads. Singh believes that the Army has the wherewithal and organizational capability to handle such an arsenal.¹⁰

Other strategic pundits like K. Subrahmanyam have repeatedly expressed the need for the military to remain part of active decision making on nuclear strategy in order to project a credible deterrent. In Subrahmanyam's words, “a minimum deterrent should demonstrate its credibility through the command and control system and overt and publicized involvement of the armed forces”.¹¹ Military officials have echoed similar sentiments too. Former Chief of the Indian Army, General Padmanabhan is believed to have stated that “India has to be prepared to fight a nuclear war even if it was unlikely to do soif we have a capability we should be prepared with our doctrines, tactics and plans...though a certain amount of work has to be done, further fine tuning is required”.¹²

c). The Changing Nature of Warfare and Greater Role for the Indian Military

General Sundarji, one of India's best military thinkers and former Chief of the Army maintained a hawkish posture on the deployment of nuclear weapons. He made a strong case for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Under his direction, the Indian Army developed a new “dissuasion” doctrine that stressed retaliatory threats to deter adversaries from undertaking hostile acts. The Brasstacks military exercise is 1987 was designed as a massive display of force intended to discourage Pakistan from continuing

⁸ Shaun Gregory, “A Formidable Challenge: Nuclear Command and Control in South Asia”, *Disarmament Diplomacy*, Volume 54, 2001.

⁹ Jasjit Singh, “Nuclear Command and Control”, <http://www.idsa-india.org/>, October, 2003.

¹⁰ Jasjit Singh, “Nuclear Command and Control”, <http://www.idsa-india.org/> October 2003.

¹¹ K. Subrahmanyam, “Underestimating India: Project a Credible Nuclear Deterrent”, *Times of India*, May 15, 2000.

¹² Rahul Bedi, “Indian Army Chief to Fine Tune Nuclear Strategy”, *Jane's Defense Weekly*, October 11, 2000.

its aid to Sikh militants in the border state of Punjab. Scholars like Kanti Bajpai argue that during that time preventive war sentiments were not universally shared within the armed forces. In a detailed study of the Brasstacks crisis, Bajpai and others noted that those Indian military officers who followed preventive war logic believed that “Pakistan would never cease its hostility towards India” and therefore “Pakistan’s decade long animus against India should be decisively crushed”.¹³ However, civilians still intervened. Other scholars like Feaver and Sagan contend that if the Indian army tightly controlled by civilians in a democracy could nevertheless trigger such a serious crisis, it is indicative of the fact that pessimistic predictions about preventive wars are warranted in future cases in which strict civilian control cannot be assured.¹⁴

Moreover, nuclear weapons are not an extension of conventional war fighting weapons. Nuclear weapons influence the nature of conventional war indirectly. The mere presence of nuclear weapons imposes caution on the adversary and impacts battlefield conduct. There is greater stress on dispersion that requires an ability to concentrate quickly for executing a conventional war.¹⁵ This requires military structures and organizations with strong levels of mechanization, mobility and improved means of command and control and communications. The Kargil war of 1999 provided us with evidence of such a scenario. The army and the civilians were careful not to cross the Line of Control in order to prevent the war from escalating to the nuclear level. As this war demonstrated, the Indian political establishment and the armed forces must be prepared to deal with range of conflicts in future from highly intense, local or limited wars to low

intensity conflicts. The need for the military to continue to undertake conventional operations under nuclear conditions demands that the military be trained in dealing with such situations and thereby expands its role.

II. India’s National Security Decision Making---Existing Shortcomings

India’s national security decision making structure has remained rather weak ever since the country gained independence. Although efforts were made time and time again to establish a robust national security decision making apparatus, all such efforts proved futile owing to bureaucratic red-tapism and lack of resolve on part of the political establishment. Despite having fought four major wars with Pakistan and one with China in addition combating insurgency in conflict zones like Kashmir and the North East, few effective institutionalized structures were in place to respond to India’s security needs. The reasons for this utter disregard in the realm of national security have been primarily political and bureaucratic. India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had a deep distrust for the armed forces. Nehru’s fears stemmed from the rise in military dictatorships across the world during India’s initial years after independence. Nehru was careful not to yield too much power to the Indian military given the dangers of military coups elsewhere. This general suspicion towards the armed forces led to their complete alienation from national security decision making and prevented their effective participation in matters of defense and security. The civilian bureaucracy in India was also wary of an increasing role of the army. India’s debacle at the hands of the Chinese in the 1962 war revealed the glaring holes in India’s national security decision making process. Despite the defeat at the hands of the Chinese, the political establishment took few steps to revamp the national security structure. In the early 1990s, the civilian bureaucracy impeded all efforts by the political establishment to establish a National Security Council and once again demonstrated the increasing control over the armed forces by the

¹³ Kanti Bajpai, P.R. Chari, Pervais Iqbal Cheema, Stephen Cohen and Sumit Ganguly, *Brasstacks and Beyond: Perception and Management of Crisis in South Asia*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

¹⁴ Peter Feaver and Scott Sagan, “Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers”, *International Security*, Volume 22(1), 1997, p.203.

¹⁵ R.R.Bali, “Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence and the Armed Forces”, *USI Digest*, Volume V(9), September 2002-February 2003.

politicians and the bureaucracy. However, the situation began to change once India conducted nuclear tests in 1998. India's nuclearization raised several questions about the role of the armed forces in decisions of strategy and security. Finally on November 19, 1998, India's first National Security Council was set up. Yet, the experience of the last five years suggests that the National Security Council has failed to achieve the desired measure of success and live up to normal expectations.

A glaring anomaly in India's national security decision making structure is the absence of a military high command in decisions of war and peace. The structure of the NSC precisely reflects this limitation. In advanced democracies like the United States and Britain, the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff and Chief of Defense Staff exist at the highest echelons of the military hierarchy. The CJCS provides an institutional link between the political leadership and the armed forces in terms of higher direction of war in addition to serving as an agency for institutionalized contingency planning. Successive governments in India have refused to accept this model due to opposition from the civilian bureaucracy who fear that such a step would marginalize their roles.

In India, the President is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) is the apex body responsible for all matters pertaining to security. The CCS is headed by the Prime Minister and its members include the Defense Minister, Home Minister, Finance Minister and Minister for External Affairs. The National Security Council (NSC) works parallel to the CCS. The NSC is supported by the Strategic Policy Group (SGP) and the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB). Besides these organizations, the Chief of Staffs Committee (COSC) is the highest authority on military matters. However a major shortcoming of this body is that it exercises no real power.¹⁶

The Chairman COSC exercises command only over his own service and the three service Chiefs are individually responsible to the Defense Minister. The missing link in this organizational set up is the lack of co-ordination between the three service chiefs leading to inter-service rivalry between the Army, Navy and Air Force. The hierarchical set up of national security decision making has not only thwarted the role of the military in matters of military strategy but has also sharpened the divide between the existing services. The stark inadequacies that were apparent in the Kargil war of 1999 and the recurring proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir indicate that existing NSC structures need to be reviewed at the earliest. India also must learn from the experience of other Western democracies.

III. Questions of Competence and Obedience

The most important questions that merit discussion relate to questions of disobedience and competence. When and under what circumstances does the military have the incentive to override orders given by civilian authorities? While the military might disobey civilian orders during peace-time, the problem becomes more pronounced during the actual conduct of war on the battlefield. There often emerge situations in which the military might be prone to shirking its responsibilities. The reasons for such behavior could range from sheer insolence or complete incompetence. A well known example of such disobedience in the United States is the Mac Arthur Case. There were clear differences between President Truman's policy of adopting containment and the military objectives of Mac Arthur. While Truman sought to use war purely for attaining political objectives, Mac Arthur was adamant in his belief that the goal of any nation at war is immediate and complete victory.

A more recent example of civil-military friction is when Colin Powell (as the head of the Joint Chief of Staff Committee) opposed military intervention in Bosnia because he held the view

¹⁶ Gurmeet Kanwal, "Command and Control of Nuclear Weapons in India", *Strategic Analysis*, Volume XXIII, No.10, January 2000, p.7.

that military should be used to achieve a decisive victory. Powell was in fundamental disagreement with the political establishment for advocating a limited use of force for securing political objectives.¹⁷ Much of the friction between civilians and the military and the consequent disregard for civilian orders, therefore, stems from the kinds of strategies employed by civilians for achieving victory during the actual conduct of war.

Although not as explicit as in the Mac Arthur case, conflict between civilians and the military has surfaced in a number of cases in India and was particularly stark during the period leading up to the 1962 war with China. Senior officers in the military like General Thimayya resented the Indian Defense Minister V.K. Krishna Menon's excessive interference in issues of military strategy. The rift between the armed forces and the bureaucrats has been a critical issue in the Indian case. Krishna Menon was the Defense Minister just before the 1962 war and General Thimayya took over as COAS. This period also witnessed the rise of Lieutenant General B. M. Kaul. Initially, relations between the two countries appeared to be cordial.

By the early 1960s, India and China had opted for a forward policy. At every session of the Defense Minister's meeting, the COAS accepted the forward posture but urged that Indian outposts be backed by minimum defense which was sound military advice. The COAS was assured that the Chinese would not attack India. However, there was no rapport between the military and the politicians. The COAS was overruled and told "this is a political decision, don't interfere. Obey orders".¹⁸ Thus, civil servants and politicians who were ignorant of the realities of military power took vital decisions. Menon subsequently invented a story accusing the COAS of planning a military

coup against Nehru. Though Menon did not succeed in getting General Thimayya dismissed, he destroyed the confidence of the PM in the COAS and the military. In course of time, this severely undermined the morale of the armed forces. Thimayya consequently resigned because the Defense Ministry kept overriding Army Headquarters on certain key appointments. Nehru then persuaded Thimayya to withdraw his resignation. Yet Thimayya appeared to lose all influence thereafter and Kaul took over the key assignment of the Chief of General Staff.

Several such cases suggest that military discontent with civilian decisions were not allowed to come to the fore. In situations where it did, civilians were quick to take action. A most recent example of civil-military friction in India during peace time was the dismissal of the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat in 1998. Bhagwat refused to appoint Vice Admiral Harinder Singh as the Deputy Chief of Naval Staff only because it was the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet that had proposed Singh's name¹⁹. Bhagwat argued that he was more experienced in selecting someone with the necessary expertise and skill required for the post. This incident exemplifies the problem of civil-military friction and raises issues about the competence of civilians in deciding matters that are best left to the military.

IV. Extra Constitutional Functions: The Role of the Military in Insurgency Operations

One of the major concerns in the relationship between civilians and the military is the extent to which the Indian army should be involved in the management of internal operations. Some evidence towards this end has been documented by scholars like Raju Thomas who argue that yielding too much power to the military often takes it away from its sphere of traditional

¹⁷ Russell Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClelland to Powell", *Journal of Military History*, Volume 57, October 1993.

¹⁸ E.A Vas, "Role of the Armed Forces in a Democracy: A Review of Fifty Years of Politico-Military Decision Making", *USI Journal*, Volume XXVIII, No.534, October-December 1998, pp.649-650.

¹⁹ Sunil Dasgupta, "India: The New Militaries", in Muthiah Alagappa's *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia*, Stanford University Press, 2001.

functions. The Indian Army has been frequently drawn into combating internal secession from the time of India's independence. Although the Indian Constitution states that the military can "aid civil authority as directed by the government", the military's role has expanded much more than the requisite powers bestowed on it by the Constitution.²⁰ Over the last few decades, the Indian Army has been primarily involved in dealing with secessionist movements in the North Eastern states of Nagaland and Assam and the northern states of Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. According to Dipankar Banerjee, each of these insurgents has presented a different challenge for the Indian Army. However, while the army was successful in quelling insurgency in some of these areas, it failed in others.

One such region that continues to take up a majority of the Indian army's resources is the war torn region of Kashmir.²¹ Banerjee attributes the success of the Indian Army in states like Nagaland to effective coordination between the army and civilian administration. However, the situation has been different for Kashmir where the government "has yet to articulate a clear policy for the region" and where the "military response to the conflict has been slow, haphazard and reactive". In Jammu and Kashmir the military has resorted to the doctrine of minimum force and has relied heavily on the infantry. This questions the extent to which regiments like the infantry which are primarily trained for war fighting should be allowed to be involved in such operations. Not only has this affected their capacity as a fighting force, it has given resentment amongst the local population in instances where the army has exceeded its role to become a police force. An important conclusion reached by Banerjee is that military strategy serves as a poor substitute for government policy and leadership in conditions of internal stability.

As part of a recent development, the Indian Army is raising 30 new Rashtriya Rifles battalions dedicated to counter insurgency. This has been

planned to augment the existing 36 RR deployed to combat the current conflict in Kashmir.²² The expansion at the rate of five 900-1000 strong battalions is a new step and a positive one. Several such measures should be taken to reduce the burden on the Indian army from participating in internal conflicts. India requires a special force constituted only for such tasks. Not only will it reduce pressures on active combat regiments like the infantry but will allow greater effectiveness in dealing with internal insurgency. Upon closer reflection, a myriad number of issues fall within the debate on civil-military relations in India. It is time to sit back and give it some serious thought.

The author was a Research Intern at Observer Research Foundation when she wrote this paper.

²⁰ Dipankar Banerjee, "Countering Internal Conflicts", <http://www.usip.org/>, July 2004.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rahul Bedi, "Indian Army will get boost for COIN operations", *Jane's Defense Weekly*, May 2001.