

**The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India** by Anit Mukherjee, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 313, Rs 1,100

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Defence, a subset of national security, is an intricate subject. Primarily, defence policy and plans of a state emerge from its national security strategy to achieve its national goals. What happens when a state does not have a declared national security strategy? All stakeholders interpret the security scenario in their way and invariably pull defence policy and plans in multiple directions. Such has been the tale of Indian defence policy and plans since independence.

There are two important verticals in a state's defence policy and plans: the executive represented by the politicians; and the executioner, the armed forces. Civil bureaucracy links these two and manages the two-way communication between them, often enmeshing its interpretation. This makes civil–military relation a lynchpin in defence policy and plans. Very few understand this complex subject comprehensively and even fewer attempt to make others understand this. In that, Anit Mukherjee attempts to decode this important facet of civil–military relations in defence policy and plans in India in his book, *The Absent Dialogue*.

The book is divided into eight chapters along with an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter titled 'Civil–Military Relations and Military Effectiveness' covers definitional aspects on the subject while the second chapter deals with the history and evolution of the civil–military equation in India. The next four chapters deal with specific

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issues of weapon procurement, jointness, professional military education (PME) and officer promotion policies through the prism of civil–military relations. The last two chapters deal with defence planning in India and the current state of the civil–military relationship.

Wars, or their absence, are an objective measure of military effectiveness. However, for an analytical work like this book, Mukherjee has selected four major strands to measure military effectiveness: weapons procurement, jointness, PME and officers' promotion policies. These issues broadly cover three significant components of application of kinetic capability—man, machine and environment. However, looking at these only through a civil–military prism has obvious drawbacks. For example, the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) Report on capital acquisitions tabled in the Parliament in 2019 clearly brings out all facets of the process and these go way beyond the civil–military relationship. Despite this limitation, Mukherjee has linked various historical events of military significance with civil–military relationship and analysed its outcome.

Owing to a long gestation period, high value and long life span, weapons procurement for the armed forces is a critical activity. Individually, each weapon system contributes to military potential and therefore military effectiveness. However, in the absence of a coordinated approach towards capability development, weapon procurement can result in suboptimal outcomes. Multiple examples of such procurements are available. Procurement of communication sets in all three services proves to be a classical example: not only there is incompatibility in an inter-services scenario but, sometimes, intra-services communications are disrupted owing to non-compatibility of communication equipment. Such procurements are not cost-effective. However, attributing such failures to below par civil–military relationship is stretching the logic too far. It is a matter of professional incompetence at all levels. Moreover, India has the dubious distinction of being the largest weapons importer of the world for the last 50 years, with a 7 per cent share of world weapon imports,<sup>1</sup> almost double of second-placed Saudi Arabia. Such a situation is a result of a failure of policymakers and policy implementers at all levels and pinning the blame solely on civil–military relation is too simplistic a approach. Such a situation can only be achieved by a continuous and personal dialogue between all stakeholders for vested interests. This, in effect, belies the title of the book.

On the next core issue of PME, Mukherjee brings out a major flaw in the Indian approach to this important facet. This owes to the domination of armed forces in this domain with little, or mostly superficial, interaction with the academic world. PME in India is a reflection of the education system in the country that focuses on cramming data and information and on its reproduction, rather than the ability to analyse it independently. With all stakeholders being a product of this education system, it will be difficult to change a subsystem of PME independently. The analysis that a weak PME is a result of uncomfortable civil–military relations thus seems out of place. In fact, education can only be meaningful when there is a free flow of information and ideas, and military hierarchical structure is barely suitable for such communication. Therefore, to improve PME, two significant changes are required. First, a systematic declassification of records and their free availability for research and analyses is mandatory. The second step is to interlink PME with academic institutions out of the purview of the military hierarchical structure. The entire organisation's apathy towards the non-establishment of the National Defence University, even after a recommendation by the Group of Ministers after the Kargil conflict in 1999, just about sums up the state of PME and its future trajectory in India.

Jointness or integration of all three services is a necessity for a comprehensive kinetic response in a crisis. However, each stakeholder seeing the environment through its own straw pipe often leads to internal conflict and a reduction in military effectiveness. This situation has been allowed to prevail in India for far too long. Although, theoretically, organisational structures exist for integrated operational planning it must be kept in mind that it is individuals that invariably dominate these institutional mechanisms. During a crisis, jointness at the operational level has been visible, like in the 1971 Indo-Pak war that led to the creation of Bangladesh, Op Cactus in the Maldives (1988), and Kargil in 1999. However, during peacetime, the differences which are primarily based on administrative issues come to the fore. A beginning has been made with the creation of Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) and more recently with the appointment of the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the requisite creation of a Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Hopefully, within the mandated three-year period, the first CDS will be able to move decisively towards integration. On his first day in office, he set

the ball rolling with a time-bound plan for an integrated Air Defence Command and logistical plan at the station level.

Promotion policies and their outcomes are the most talked about subject in the armed forces. However, the selection of officers for the higher ranks (comprising three and four stars) has a major implication on military effectiveness. Seniority, though an objective criterion, needs to be bypassed for capability. However, the assessment of capability is very subjective. Several factors, all of which are not necessarily professional, play a pivotal role here. Whether the assessor is a politician, a bureaucrat or from the armed forces, opinions and perceptions, as brought out by Mukherjee, play a vital role. The selection of a wrong candidate for a key appointment will invariably lead to failure and the 1962 Sino-Indian war is a perfect example of this. In the Indian government system, the role played by the bureaucracy in controlling the narrative practically gives them the reigns. The situation gets accentuated by a few ambitious personnel in the military cadre. Here, interpersonal relations between individuals holding key appointments defines the outcome of interaction and, often, institutions remain subservient to these individuals. This aspect needs a serious review to enhance military effectiveness.

Overall, this is a well-researched book, with the depth of research visible in the citation of a number of primary sources to understand various phases of evolving civil–military equation in India and its impact on military effectiveness. Yet, this work suffers on three major accounts. First, it begins with a presumption that politicians, bureaucrats and armed forces, though experts in their domains, have very little expertise in understanding defence policy and plans. Second, the work does not take into account that all three entities are an integral part of the same society and have more commonalities than differences owing to their chosen professions. Third, the civil–military relationship is not a comprehensive prism to holistically view all major facets of military effectiveness. Nevertheless, Mukherjee brings out valuable extracts from multiple sources to support his analysis of the evolution of civil–military relations in India.

Additionally, this reviewer found that too often in the book the same logic is repeated, and sometimes on the same page. In case such repetitions were eliminated, the book would be about 20 per cent thinner and make for a more interesting read with tighter arguments. Another aspect that appears as a weakness is the overdependence on inputs from the armed forces on evaluating the civil–military relationship. A close scrutiny of

the list of personnel interviewed indicates a major share for the armed forces (71 per cent), with bureaucrats (18 per cent) and politicians (3 per cent) as minor stakeholders. A more equitable input from all three elements would have been interesting.

Notwithstanding certain drawbacks about force-fitting four significant factors of military effectiveness with civil–military relations, *The Absent Dialogue* makes for an interesting read. Individually, all four aspects of military effectiveness dealt in this book are very well covered, with appropriate linking of historical events. Therefore, besides the armed forces, it is best suited for politicians, bureaucrats, historians and academics dealing with national security and defence. Interviews and quotes from several practitioners make it easy to understand the practical aspects of civil–military relationship. They also help put forward a point of view which is otherwise not easily available in the public domain. Mukherjee’s book helps the reader to understand the basics of development of civil–military relations in India. Additionally, the book dispels a large number of myths about the historic evolution of this relationship and its impact on military effectiveness. Having said that, to fully grasp and appreciate all aspects highlighted in the book by the author, first-hand experience of the civil–military equation is desirable.

#### NOTE

1. Details are available on the “SIPRI Database”, <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>, accessed on 30 December 2019.

