

India's Higher Defence Organisation: Implications for National Security and Jointness

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INTRODUCTION

In the minds of the average person on the street, one suspects that the phrase "higher defence organization" evokes an intimidating vision of row upon row of be-medalled and be-whiskered Generals, with the dark shadowy figure of a "soldier on horseback" (that mythical usurper of power) looming in the background.

Too complex and dreadful to contemplate, they shut this vision out of their minds, and revert to the mundane, with which they feel far more comfortable. It is for this specific reason that in the title of this paper "National Security" has been added to "Higher Defence Organization." Not that our comprehension of "National Security" is very much better; and in this context, just one example will suffice.

Soon after the July 2006 serial train blasts in Mumbai, which resulted in over 200 dead and over 700 injured, as Chief of Naval Staff (CNS), I attended a very high level inter-agency meeting of functionaries to discuss this issue. After the presentations, discussions and brain-storming lasting a couple of hours, a final question was asked -- what urgent remedial and precautionary measures should we take to prevent recurrence of such incidents?

After a pregnant silence, the sole suggestion that was voiced, shook me to the core, because of the pedestrian and worm's eye perspective that it demonstrated: "We must give the SHOs at the *thana* level more and better quality walkie-talkie sets to ensure faster communications."

And this, after the nation has been experiencing bomb blasts or terrorist attacks with monotonous regularity in the wake of the horrifying 1993 Mumbai carnage; Parliament (2001), Akshardham (2002), Mumbai (2003), Ayodhya (2005), Varanasi (2006), Hyderabad (2007) and many others. The question remained hanging in the air: is buying more walkie-talkie sets the panacea for the tremendous hazards facing India's security today?

CHALLENGES TO NATIONAL SECURITY

In all our history, perhaps this is the most appropriate juncture for a comprehensive discussion of issues relating to National Security or the Higher Defence Organization(HDO). There are three reasons for this:-

- Firstly, if there is one lesson we should learn from the past, it is that economic and social progress cannot take place in an environment that is not secure. It has to be clearly recognized that economic progress by itself is not viable, unless it has an essential security underpinning.
- Secondly, even if we shun concepts like regional doctrines or spheres of influence, India's emergence as a regional power has its own implications. The need to safeguard not just India's own vital national interests, but also assisting our friends, when required, casts a heavy mantle of responsibility on us.
- And finally, a fortuitous combination of factors (economic, demographic and geo-political) has created a "critical mass" and placed the country on a trajectory which generates its own security compulsions.

Therefore, no matter how non-violent or pacifist India's heritage and inclinations, it behoves on us at this point in time, to reflect on the security challenges that confront India, pinpoint what we have been doing wrong and undertake the necessary reforms, urgently.

THE ASYMMETRIC WAR

A brief overview of the security situation would help to sensitize the reader to the situation which would alarm the citizens of any other country, but one which Indians have come to accept with customary resignation. Let us first dwell on matters relating to internal security.

Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) obviously plans 10-15 years ahead, and what we have been facing for some years now, and will continue to face, is best termed as "asymmetric war"; waged by a ruthless and imaginative adversary with no holds barred. Its most obvious manifestation has been the cold-blooded orchestration of violence in our urban areas amidst the civilian population. This is done through a complex and well-organized network of agents and surrogates who are trained, equipped and financed to wreak havoc.

This war has many other dimensions, of which we notice only a few. Aiding separatism and insurgency, encouraging demographic invasion, attacking our economy by pumping in fake currency, inciting communal

violence, and undermining the morale and cohesion of the armed forces (often through the instrumentality of the Indian media) are some other facets of this multi-pronged assault on the Indian state. By our benign neglect, and failure to appreciate its full scope and depth, we have probably aided and abetted this offensive.

Most of India's North-East has become a metaphor for mayhem, with the lines between administration and anarchy, and extortion and excise having been totally blurred. It is common knowledge that Central Government funds are continuously siphoned off, and eventually buy the insurgent, bullets which kill the jawans of the Indian Army (IA). But no one seems to worry or care.

The Naxalite movement has manifested itself with renewed vigour in 118 districts running in an almost continuous swathe through 12 states, from Kerala to Bihar (virtually half the country). For forty years this grave menace has been viewed with blasé complacency and handled in a most effete manner. Today the movement has expanded to a point that it obtains support and sustenance from the Nepalese Maoists on its northern flank and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the southern flank.

The most remarkable aspect of the situation is the contrast between thought process of the perpetrators of the asymmetric war, and the Indian State. The calculus and planning of the ISI-Pakistan Army combine runs seamlessly from sub-conventional to conventional warfare, and then on to nuclear conflict; the whole paradigm working in tandem with clever diplomatic posturing.

India, on the other hand, have kept the different aspects of these conflicts strictly compartmentalized, and hence our response to the asymmetric war is disjointed, fragmented and disorganized. The reasons for this are twofold; our national security establishment has encouraged turf distribution and creation of fiefdoms, and thereby deprived itself of the benefits of holistic thinking and synchronized action. And secondly, in a system that must be unique in the world, the Armed Forces are kept on the margins of national security management by a powerful bureaucracy, and rarely consulted or heard – even on issues in which they have exclusive expertise.

EXTERNAL SECURITY

In the absence of a coherent long-term security strategy, sixty years of independence have seen the progressive worsening of relations with each one of our immediate neighbours and a consequent deterioration in India's external security environment.

In the security arena, India's intelligence apparatus has earned us the dubious distinction of having been "surprised" over and over again; starting with the Pakistanis a few weeks after Independence in 1947, the Chinese in 1962, by the Pakistanis again in 1965, and yet again in Kargil in 1999. On each occasion, it has been the courage, patriotic spirit and sacrifice of our armed forces which has redeemed national honour.

The one occasion when we were not "surprised" was the 1971 Bangladesh war. But sadly, the tremendous gains of India's well planned campaign, and historic victory in this conflict were frittered away in Shimla by our negotiators. Not only because we entered the conflict, lacking a war-termination or post-war strategy, but mainly because the national leadership and bureaucracy, yet again disdained the idea of consulting the Armed Forces. Vital decisions with serious long-term implications were taken without consulting those whose bread and butter is the nation's security.

So where are we today? Kashmir remains a running sore where we continue to pay for the folly of the hasty and militarily indefensible 1947 ceasefire, followed by the post-1971 Shimla fiasco. The Chinese remain in occupation of Aksai Chin, and belligerently lay claims to 100,000 sq km of Arunachal Pradesh.

Our immediate neighbourhood remains tense and unfriendly. The stubborn and seemingly intractable hostility of Bangladesh can perhaps best be explained by our diplomats who have dealt with this country since its creation with the help of Indian arms 36 years ago.

In the recent turmoil in Nepal, the extent of our influence could be gauged by the fact that it was not an Indian diplomat or official functionary whom the Maoists deigned to consult, but someone outside the Government; a CPI leader. He was invited again recently and presented with a Maoist guard of honour!

In Sri Lanka our policy of extreme caution, has delivered not just rapidly diminishing returns, but has created an unhappy spiral of discord. The more negative and lackadaisical India's response to Sri Lanka's urgent security needs, the more they have approached an obliging China and Pakistan for help, and the more upset South Block has consequently become with the Sri Lankans; and so it goes on. By distancing herself from the developments in Sri Lanka on account of electoral politics, India has lost all leverage in the dispute, and we could be sucked in by a sudden conflagration in the island nation without warning. Now, by pontificating on whom the Sri Lankans should or should not seek help from, we stand to lose further goodwill and influence with them.

Finally, by establishing a nuclear and missile proliferation nexus with North Korea and Pakistan, China has, with one master-stroke, checkmated India's regional ambitions. Any advantages that we may have had in superior nuclear technology or research facilities, have been wiped out by illicit nuclear and missile hardware transfers that have regularly been taking place, between these three nations, right under our nose; mostly by the sea route. All this has put us strategically on the backfoot vis-à-vis Pakistan

THE HISTORICAL UNDERPINNING

It may be possible to rationalize India's security dilemmas on the grounds that we are a "young" nation, and relatively inexperienced in such matters. But there are nations, equally young, or even younger, which have managed their affairs differently or perhaps better: Israel, Singapore, and China are just three examples. Besides, we never tire of reminding people that we are the heirs to a wise and ancient civilization.

Be that as it may, in order to examine any problem in a meaningful way in India's context, and to obtain some comprehension of the causal factors and remedies available, it is essential to delve into our eventful history. With this background it may be easier to decide where we should go from here.

OUR SHORTCOMINGS

Unless one travels as far back as the Mauryan period (325-200 BC) or the Gupta period (4th and 5th centuries AD), Indian history makes dismal reading. With a few notable exceptions, the same socio-cultural shortcomings stare at us repeatedly.

Only in a very few cases, were foreign invasions stopped or defeated, because when invaders knocked at their gates, Indian rulers considered it far more expedient to gain advantage or settle scores with their neighbours, than to unite and fight a common enemy. Even when the battle was going well for us, invaders had no difficulty in subverting our people. A greedy "qilladar" could always be found to open the fortress gates, or a treacherous subedar would desert his ruler, for a few pieces of gold. But then every nation has its quislings, and the mere perfidy of people like Jai Chand or Mir Jaffar could not, by itself, have laid us open to foreign domination.

In the battles fought by the East India Company against the Mughals, Marathas, Mysore rulers, and the Sikhs, the Indian sepoy played a key role. There were Jats, Purbiyas, Muslims, Marathas, and Avadhis on

both sides, and they must have fought with equal courage. But the depressingly frequent adverse (for us) outcome of battles was decided by the outstanding leadership of the British officers, when pitted against the indolent and spineless Indian rajas, nawabs, and peshwas.

Yet there were many exceptions where Indian arms were victorious against foreign forces; so again, one cannot say that the poor leadership displayed by Indian rulers or generals was a decisive factor in our history.

A dispassionate study of Indian history, however, does clearly bring out that if there is one lesson to be learnt, it is this. It was the complete lack of strategic vision on the part of our rulers and military leaders, and their inability to rise above internecine feuds, petty rivalries and internal squabbles, and to plan for the strategic defence of Indian territory. This is what led, time and time again, to military defeats and thus to humiliating subjugation by a handful of invaders.

Jawaharlal Nehru writes in *The Discovery of India*: "It seems clear that India became a prey to foreign conquest because of the inadequacy of her own people and because, like the British, the invaders represented a higher and advancing social order. The contrast between the leaders on both sides is marked; the Indians for all their ability, functioned in a narrow, limited sphere of thought and action, unaware of what was happening elsewhere... ."

QUO VADIS?

So if this is the background where should we go from here? Taking the most obvious lessons of India's history to heart, one of the first acts of our post-Independence leadership should have been to devise and put in place, a sound and coherent national security edifice to safeguard our newly won freedom against all threats.

Regrettably this was far from what actually happened, and according to the American scholar George Tanham, "... the forces of culture and history and the attitude and policies of the independent Indian governments worked against the concept of strategic thinking and planning. As India's need for strategic planning increases, a structure for planning is likely to develop slowly in the future."

It is in this context, that attention is now drawn to post-Independence developments, in the higher management of defence and where we stand in this regard today.

THE POST-INDEPENDENCE REORGANIZATION OF DEFENCE

In 1947, it so happened that two of the most experienced Allied military leaders, Lord Louis Mountbatten and his Chief of Staff, Lord Lionel Ismay were in India. The Government of India promptly asked them to evolve a system of higher defence management, which would meet the emerging needs of the newly independent nation.

Ismay was deeply conscious of the fact that no radical measures could be contemplated at that delicate juncture, when the sub-continent was about to be carved up into two nations, and the armed forces split asunder. He therefore came up with a solution which called for the least amount of turbulence and readjustment, and would serve admirably for the interim, till a proper system could be developed to suit Indian conditions.

He recommended a pragmatic system which was based on a Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) for the operational management and administration of each Service, and a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) for central coordination. The COSC was to be supported by a series of other committees to address details of coordination between the Services, and between the Services and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and to provide for quick decision making with a minimum of red tape. All the committees were to have civil servants as members, and therefore, their decisions were not to be subject to detailed scrutiny by the MoD.

A FLAWED INHERITANCE

The system of higher defence management recommended by Lord Ismay was a very practical and workable one. It had the potential to evolve, so that the three Service Headquarters (SHQ) could have, with time and further experience, become separate Departments of the MoD (like the Departments of Defence Production or Defence Finance). Alternatively, the three SHQs could have integrated themselves completely with the Department of Defence within the MoD.

However, not only did this not happen, but within a short period of its implementation, the senior civil servants of the time intervened to completely distort the concept of "civilian supremacy" to give it their own interpretation of "bureaucratic control" over the armed forces. This was done by the simple expedient of designating the three SHQs as "Attached Offices" of the Department of Defence, giving them (as per the GoI Rules of Business) a status exactly on par with organizations such as the Salt Commissioner, Commissioner for Handicrafts, CRPF, and CISF, etc.

The SHQs, in keeping with their status of Attached Offices, found that they were reduced to adjuncts of MoD, and also placed completely outside the Ministry, which they could approach only through the medium of files. Having submitted a case on file, all that the SHQ could do was to wait like a supplicant for the wheels of MoD to grind at their leisurely pace, while targets and deadlines slipped, steadily but surely.

The administrative effectiveness of the Service Chiefs steadily eroded, to the point where their recommendations to the Defence Minister began to be routinely sent for scrutiny and comment to the Director level, and would then slowly work their way upwards, open to comment (or even rejection) at every level of bureaucracy!

For fifty years the armed forces lived with this iniquitous and dysfunctional system, and it took the near disaster of Kargil to trigger some change.

POST-KARGIL DEVELOPMENTS

THE GROUP OF MINISTERS REPORT

The findings of the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) contained a scathing indictment of the national security system, and pointed out glaring deficiencies in our intelligence services, border management and higher defence organization.

The KRC led to the formation of a Group of Ministers (GoM) to examine reforms in the national security system, which in turn commissioned four Task Forces in April 2000, for the examination of different components of the system.

The one relevant to the present discussion was the Task Force on Management of Defence, headed by former Minister of State for Defence Arun Singh, and of which this writer was a member. It was charged with, essentially, a critical examination of existing structures for management of defence.

THE ARUN SINGH TASK FORCE

Against the backdrop of the KRC, the Task Force was to take into account, inter alia, the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and our status as a nuclear weapon state, and to suggest changes for improving the management of defence, as well as ways of bringing about closer integration between Services and, between the MoD and the Services.

Arun Singh not only had a great deal of administrative experience, but also intimate knowledge of the armed forces, coupled with a deep

concern about the extant national security situation. The Task Force therefore, cast its net far and wide, and sought views on the full spectrum of problems and issues relating to defence in all its aspects, from experts as well as from laymen.

As far as Higher Defence Management was concerned, the Task Force faced a dilemma. If the Task Force overbid its hand, it was quite possible that we would frighten the politicians, and the recommendations would be consigned to gather dust in a musty cupboard. On the other hand, this was the first opportunity in half a century to rectify much that was wrong with the nation's security edifice, and it would be a great shame if this rare and precious window of opportunity was wasted by underbidding.

THE ISSUES OF CONTENTION

The dialogue and discussion that took place within the Task Force was comprehensive and freewheeling. But if one had read about the intense public debate which raged in the US, prior to passing of the Goldwater-Nichols National Security Act of Congress 1986, one could not help being struck by a remarkable sense of *déjà vu*. Virtually all the arguments were the same, and more or less everything that was said in the US was repeated in India, with local variations. I highlight some of the more prominent issues.

- The underlying root of contention was a sense of insecurity in the Indian Air Force (IAF), possibly engendered by the fear that some of their roles, or even assets were coveted by the Army (IA) and the Navy(IN). The Air Force viewed with deep suspicion and unease, any proposal which would subject its acquisition or deployment plans to scrutiny by an officer from the other two Services. It was thus against any alterations in the status quo in the context of both integration and command and control, and was determined to fight them tooth and nail.
- Historically, the apprehensions of the IAF were not unfounded; the IN had wrested control of Maritime Reconnaissance, and the IA had taken away AOP or Air Observation Post (re-named Army Aviation Corps). Close air support vs counter-air operations continued to be a hotly debated issue. They were naturally worried about the future, and their concern was aggravated by the fact that aviation assets had been proliferating not only in all three Services, but also the para-military organizations.
- Possibly to pre-empt further attempts at "poaching", the IAF

insisted that unless the "Roles and Missions" of each Service were clearly delineated (and frozen), it would be pointless to discuss any changes in management structures. This was, however, a difficult proposition, and the IAF objection remained outstanding.

- The IAF also took the stand that the Services were already sufficiently integrated, and any further attempts at enhancing Jointness should only follow the integration of the Services with the MoD.
- The civil services too, felt threatened by grant of any autonomy to the Armed Forces. They stoutly maintained that the status of Attached Offices for the SHQs was appropriate, and that there was already more than adequate consultation between the MoD and SHQs. Any further integration was therefore neither necessary nor desirable.
- Thus, a common cause emerged, and a view shared by more than one member of the Task Force, was that that the COSC system had functioned quite well for over 50 years and had seen us through many conflicts. It required no change, and therefore a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was not necessary in the Indian environment.
- While the IA expressed support for the proposed reforms, there were perceptible murmurs that a "million-plus strong force" must receive its proper due vis-à-vis the smaller Services, if there was going to be any reorganization of the higher defence management system.
- The IN's leadership had decided (not without considerable internal discussion) to offer the "Far Eastern Naval Command" as a token of their support to the cause of Jointness. There was little debate therefore, in the Task Force, over the Joint Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC) ; because it came virtually as a gift from the IN, and was a net gain for the other two Services.
- In the context of the Strategic Forces Command(SFC), there were serious differences. Whether it should be the preserve of a single Service or placed under a Joint Command, but the issue was eventually resolved by consensus.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GOM

After five months of deliberations, the Task Force on Management of Defence cobbled together a consensus, and submitted its report in end

September 2000 to the GoM, which after a quick consideration issued their recommendations on 'Reforming the National Security System' in February 2001.

The KRC report having been submitted in December 1999, it was probably an unprecedented achievement for the Indian system to have undertaken such a comprehensive review of national security, and produced an actionable set of recommendations within a period of 14 months. This is all the more reason for regret that we should have faltered in the implementation of the most critical ones.

Of the Task Force recommendations, the salient ones which were accepted in toto, or with minor modifications are listed below, as stated in the GoM report:

- In order to remove the impression that they did not participate in policy formation and were outside the Government apex structure, SHQ be designated as "Integrated Headquarters" instead of Attached Offices.
- In order to expedite decision making and enhance efficiency, financial and administrative powers be delegated to Service HQs and lower formations.
- Since the COSC has not been effective in fulfilling its mandate, it be strengthened by the addition of a CDS and a Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS).
- The CDS is required to be established to fulfill the following functions:-
 - ❖ To provide single point military advice to the Government.
 - ❖ To administer the Strategic Forces.
 - ❖ To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process through intra and inter-Service prioritization.
 - ❖ To ensure the required "Jointness" in the armed forces.
- The CDS may be a four-star officer from one of the three Services in rotation, and will function as the permanent Chairman of the COSC.
- The details relating to the precise role and function of the CDS and his relationship with the other key actors in the defence setup, particularly the Service Chiefs would need to be worked out.
- Two joint formations; the SFC and the ANC were established, with their Commanders reporting to the CDS.

In addition to the above, the GoM made numerous other recommendations in respect of restructuring of MoD, planning and budgeting, procurement procedures, Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) and National Defence University, etc. An Implementation Cell was set up to monitor implementation of the GoM recommendations.

THE AFTERMATH

For those of us serving in respective Service HQs, mid-2001 was a heady period. It seemed that the right set of circumstances and personalities had fortuitously combined to finally provide an opportunity to dust the cobwebs off India's national security system, and bring it into the 21st century. But high drama was enacted alongside low farce, as our unfortunate historical-cultural traits emerged once again, and narrow parochial ends were allowed to prevail over the larger national interests, in an extremely short-sighted manner.

Behind the scenes political lobbying by senior retired service officers, accompanied by dire predictions emanating from the Services themselves, confirmed the worst fears of the political establishment. The appointment of a CDS was scuttled at the last moment, and this ripped the heart out of the GoM recommendations for "Reforming the National Security System."

However, the Implementation Cell proceeded to implement the remaining GoM recommendations, and by the end of 2001, many changes had been wrought in the realm of higher defence organization, including the creation of an Integrated Defence Staff (IDS), two new Integrated Commands, and considerable devolution of financial and administrative powers.

The IDS, (under a VCDS), had originally been meant to provide support to the CDS, and to function as his HQ. However since there was neither a CDS nor a VCDS, the convoluted title of "Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chiefs of Staff Committee" (CISC), was created for a three-star officer to run the IDS.

Having got thus far, both the political establishment and the bureaucracy felt that they had done a good job, and could now rest on their oars. There is no doubt that the national security system did benefit from the heuristic scrutiny that it was subjected to, for the first time since Independence. Many overdue reforms and changes were brought about, which enhanced operational and administrative efficiency.

However, at the macro level, the fact remained that we had travelled to what was merely, a "half-way house", and this had in many ways made things worse for the Armed Forces. The most glaring lacunae were represented by the failure to promote integration and to reform the COSC system.

INADEQUACIES IN THE CURRENT SYSTEM

In every Western democracy (the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy), as well as in every Asia-Pacific nation of consequence (China, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Sri Lanka) there is a duly appointed CDS who enjoys the full confidence and trust of the head of state or head of government, to whom he directly reports. There can be no better way of ensuring supremacy and control of civil authority over the military.

In India on the other hand, successive governments have found it difficult to forge a consensus on the appointment of a CDS. Whatever the facts of the matter are, it is a sad commentary, on the prevailing mindsets that India is unable to reach a consensus on an issue of such importance to national security.

Prior to embarking on a discussion on the inadequacies of the current system, two quotations are given below; one from the KRC Report and another from the GoM Report, in the hope that they will provide an objective background, and support the arguments that subsequently follow.

In a significant comment on India's national security management, the KRC Report had this to say:

"India is perhaps the only major democracy where the Armed Forces Headquarters are outside the apex governmental structure....The present obsolete system has perpetuated the culture of the British Imperial theatre system of an India Command, whereas what we need is a National Defence HQ...The status quo is often mistakenly defended as embodying civilian ascendancy over the armed forces., which is not the real issue. In fact, locating the SHQ in the Government will further enhance civilian supremacy."

A year later, in a slightly different context, the GoM had placed their finger squarely on the spot when they stated in the opening paragraphs of the chapter, on Management of Defence:

"The functioning of the COSC has, to date, revealed serious weaknesses in its ability to provide single point military advice to the government, and resolve substantive inter-Service doctrinal, planning, policy and operational issues adequately. This institution needs to be appropriately revamped..."

THE MOD-SERVICE HQ EQUATION

The Arun Singh Task Force debated on two alternatives for the integration of the Services with the MoD. One was to convert the Service HQs into Departments of the GoI within the MoD, with the respective Vice Chiefs duly empowered to function as the Secretary-equivalent. The other was to integrate the SHQ with MoD by cross-posting Service officers and civil servants against selected posts allowing them to serve three to five year tenures. Both the propositions were perceived to have flaws, and were rejected.

The GoM obviously felt that having upgraded the SHQ from "Attached Offices" to "Integrated Headquarters", and ordered the devolution of various powers, they had resolved the half a century old problem of integration. Regrettably, all that actually happened on the ground was that the Navy (alone of the three Services) changed the designation of Naval Headquarters to "Integrated HQ of MoD", but otherwise no change took place in either the MoD-SHQ equation, or in the functioning of the MoD.

Under the present system, each department of the MoD forms a separate layer of bureaucracy; so a case emanating from the Service HQ, will receive independent scrutiny by the Department of Defence, and the Department of Defence Finance (and often the Ministry of Finance), and the queries are often sequential and repetitive. With many queries to be answered on file, and each file movement taking many weeks, it is no surprise that cases take years to fructify.

Even in the most routine of cases, the main role of MoD seems to merely pose repeated queries and objections on file, and then await a response. The responsibility and accountability for missed deadlines, slipped targets and unspent budget rests entirely on the SHQ. The processing time of cases could be cut down to 1/10th by the simple expedient of all concerned functionaries sitting around a table to discuss all issues threadbare, and then recording comments/decisions on file. But for some reason, the adoption of such a system is unacceptable to the bureaucracy in India.

THE CHAIRMAN COSC

When this writer became the Chairman COSC in February 2005, he was the fourth successive incumbent in a mere six months. Similarly, when he handed over the baton, twenty months later, it was on the cards that as per existing rules, there would be three more changes of Chairman COSC in the following ten months!

Given the range and scale of the responsibilities and the time required to familiarise himself with them, a two or three month tenure for a Chairman is an absurdity. But this is just a symptom of the deeper malaise, which is that we are persisting with an anachronistic and dysfunctional system; an aspect that does not seem to be of concern to our national security managers.

In this day and age, such are the demands of being the operational and administrative head of an armed force, that no Service Chief can devote more than five to ten per cent of his time to the responsibilities of Chairman COSC (which now include the ANC and SFC) without neglecting his own Service. To fulfill a charter such as this, the Chairman COSC (by whatever name he is known) has to be a full-time incumbent, or we can be sure that important national security issues will lie neglected.

FUNCTIONING OF THE COSC

Praising the COSC, and saying that "it has met all the challenges in the past, including many conflicts" is now a favourite theme of those who wish to confuse the issue, and provide an "escape route" to the political establishment. It conveys, by implication, that all is well with India's higher defence organization and that no change is necessary. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Since the Chairman of the COSC is a rotational, part-time functionary, and only the "first amongst equals", the power that he wields in the Committee, is nominal. Moreover, there is an unwritten convention that disagreement between members of the COSC will not be displayed in public. Both these factors combine to ensure that very few issues of substance are ever discussed in the COSC meetings, and much of its agenda consists of trivialities.

Depending on the advice of the Defence Secretary and inclination of the incumbent Defence Minister, issues with inter-Service implications may or may not be referred to the COSC. Similarly, the views and recommendations of the Chairman COSC may or may not be given the weightage and recognition which is rightly due to the head of the highest inter-Service body.

There is more form than substance in the COSC today, and it merely provides a fig leaf for those who wish the status quo to prevail.

STATUS OF JOINTMANSHIP

Jointness is viewed with great enthusiasm by middle and junior ranking officers of the three services. It also receives a great deal of lip service, and

cosmetic praise in all public functions or ceremonies, because it has become a catch-phrase which is indicative of a "progressive" military outlook.

But at senior levels, especially in the SHQ, there is little evidence of Jointmanship, and information regarding plans, acquisitions and especially new raisings, is carefully kept away from sister Services. Two examples will illustrate this.

- The IN and the IAF were caught by surprise in end-2005, to find that a Cadre Review (as a result of the Ajai Vikram Singh Report) had been implemented exclusively for the Indian Army. Months later, they had to fight a furious rear-guard action with MoD, to obtain the same benefits for their personnel. The current, unseemingly public display of differences between the services over part two of this report further highlights the inadequacies of the COSC.
- The first information about the impending establishment of the new South-Western Army Command in early 2005, came to the IN and IAF only from media reports. Neither the proposal, nor its approval came via the COSC.

THE FORCE PLANNING PROCESS

The most adverse impact of the failure of the Indian Armed forces to coalesce, is felt in the arena of force planning. With budgets shrinking in real terms, there is a dire need for prioritizing the hardware requirements projected by SHQ, so that funds can be channelized in the right direction at the right time. This prioritization has to be based on an objective evaluation of the need that a particular weapon system is meant to satisfy, in the prevailing threat scenario, against fund availability for that year. Currently, a modality for such an exercise does not exist because no Service Chief will brook any curtailment of his requirement list by the HQ IDS (which compiles annual and five-year plans).

The force planning process therefore consists of merely adding up the "wish lists" of the three Services and forwarding them to the MoD. It is here that the pruning and prioritization is undertaken; often arbitrarily. It is just a matter of good fortune that our cumbersome procedures rarely permit any Service to expend its full budgetary allocation otherwise there could be serious fiscal shortfalls, because each Service would insist on having all its requirements fulfilled.

Whether it is a self-propelled artillery system, an aircraft carrier or a combat aircraft, there is rarely a meaningful debate amongst the informed professionals (the Armed Forces) because of the unstated understanding

amongst the Chiefs that "if you don't interfere with my plans, I'll not comment on yours." Intra and inter-Service prioritization of acquisitions was a function that the GoM had specifically mandated the CDS to perform.

CDS AND THEATRE COMMANDS

In India, the Service Chiefs have since Independence, continued to wear two hats; a "staff hat" as the Chief of Staff and an "operational hat" as the Commander-in-Chief of his force. This is an anachronism, and in all modern military organizations, the operational war-fighting responsibilities are delegated to designated Theatre Commanders, while the Service Chiefs are responsible only for recruitment, training and logistics of the armed forces. This issue was not addressed by the GoM, but is linked very closely to the CDS format. One would like to emphasize the fact that since no Chief would like to preside over his own divestment, it is unrealistic to expect a favourable recommendation for the CDS system from the Services.

The IN, by virtue of its medium of operation, has always seen itself as a "trans-national" force, and planned its structure and doctrines accordingly. The theatre concept is therefore eminently suitable to the operational template being developed by the IN. The stance of the other two Services has, however, remained ambivalent.

Having rendered sterling support to jointness and related concepts, right up to the GoM Report implementation stage, the Indian Army appears to have undergone a change of heart thereafter. The view that has been expressed of late says the theatre concept is meant only for countries which envisage "expeditionary operations". It is further affirmed that the Indian Army is so engrossed in internal security (IS) and low intensity conflict operations (LICO) that such concepts have no place in their vision. An interesting question has been posed in the context of a CDS; how will a non-Army CDS function effectively if he cannot "appreciate the terrain"?

This view seems to ignore recent history wherein the Army has intervened in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, and the possibility that in future, it may have to defend our own island territories. Even the most pessimistic observer will not give more than a few years for the resolution of our IS and LIC problems. As a regional power, should we then not be looking at the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force, theatre commands, and even at expeditionary operations?

The IAF's stance is even more interesting. On one hand, it has maintained its rigid stance that no change in the Higher Defence Organization is necessary since the current system is doing so well. At the same time, the

Service, by virtue of its newly acquired reach and punch is stridently projecting itself as a "trans-oceanic" force. It has even staked a claim (to the IN's consternation) to protect India's shipping lanes! There is no doubt, that the acquisition of the Su-30 and the in-flight refuellers (to be joined shortly by the AWACS and the new multi-role combat aircraft) has invested the IAF with a strategic status it did not earlier possess. However, the IAF cannot exploit this new strategic capability with an archaic and dysfunctional system of higher defence management.

There is obviously a need for some serious soul-searching at the higher levels of our Armed Forces.

OUR CREDIBLE NUCLEAR DETERRENT

As has been brought out earlier, there are heavy demands on a Service Chief's time which prevent him from doing full justice to the rotational appointment of Chairman COSC. With the constitution of HQ IDS many routine COSC issues are now dealt with by the CISC or the PSOs.

However, this is not applicable to matters relating to the nuclear deterrent, where the Chairman must devote his full personal attention and time to deal with SFC, DAE and DRDO on issues of vital national interest. However, I would just state that if for no other reason, but to ensure the "credibility" of our nuclear deterrent, it is vital for us to have a full-time Chairman COSC or a CDS in place.

THE WAY AHEAD

In conclusion, it needs to be clearly understood that matters like the reorganization of our higher defence organization, jointness, and even deterrence impinge not just on the Armed Forces, but have a much wider impact on the nation's security. These are not issues which will go away if you ignore them, but on the contrary the more we delay vital decisions, the more we stand to lose in the long run, in terms of national security.

It is now time that all the actors involved; the Armed Forces, the Civil Service and the politicians rose above petty, parochial considerations and did what is right and necessary for the nation's safety and security. Therefore, it is incumbent on the national leadership to initiate an agonizing re-appraisal of certain key security issues, with a view to bringing about long overdue change. The sum and substance of what has been said above is summarized here:

- Jointmanship in our context is currently skin deep and cosmetic. When it comes to what they perceived as their "core interests", the three Services will compete with each other fiercely, often making external mediation necessary.
- Like their counterparts everywhere, our armed forces, are inherently conservative and "status-quoist", by nature, and will not be able to bring about any change in the higher defence organization on their own. Any changes that are considered necessary in the larger interest will have to be imposed by political diktat.
- In order to engender a sense of mutual confidence amongst the Armed Forces, the Chiefs could consider signing Memoranda of Understanding clarifying roles, missions and other areas of ambiguity. Such a practice is followed in the US military.
- By trying to "muddle through" with a defence management system which is clearly outdated and largely dysfunctional, we are hazarding India's security and vital interests. Reform is an urgent necessity.
- In this context, we needed to learn from the experience of other nations (especially the Nuclear Weapon States) who have, in the past fifty-sixty years gone through exercises relating to reorganization of higher defence organization and learn from their mistakes.
- However, the Indian polity, for the foreseeable future is going to be completely preoccupied with issues of social, regional and electoral significance. It is therefore unlikely that the political establishment will be able to devote the time and attention that is essential, to national security issues.
- For this reason, it is necessary in the national interest, for the GoI to constitute a bi-partisan (or multi-party) Parliamentary Committee, assisted by experts, for a wide ranging and comprehensive review and re-examination of national security issues (including reorganization of the higher defence organization).

The findings and recommendations of this Committee should be tabled in Parliament, and if we are really serious about the nation's security, any reforms or changes contemplated in the national security framework and structures, or in the defence organization must be eventually incorporated and enforced as an Act of Parliament. □