

Jointness in Strategic Capabilities: Can we avoid it?

Raja Menon

Jointness has so far eluded the Indian Armed Forces. All thinking officers in the services are aware that much more jointness cannot be avoided if the Indian Armed Forces are to retain their excellent reputation. But this thinking community often comes up abruptly against many senior officers who dissuade them from being idealistic, on the grounds that under the cloak of jointness, their individual services would suffer losses in men, responsibilities and budgeting.

The anti-jointness lobby pride themselves on being hard-headed realists who understand the inevitable in-fighting in Delhi and pride themselves on their mastery of this vicious process. At the same time there have been intermittent periods of jointness which have often pulled the Indian strategic chestnuts out of the fire, with relative ease. But these events are sporadic and were never converted into a process.¹ The airlift of the Sikhs and Kumaonis to save Srinagar in 1947, and the paradrop at Tangail in 1971 are often quoted as fine examples of jointness. But those who bring up these examples do a great disservice to the debate, by permitting the status-quoists to re-assure themselves that all is therefore well and no reform is necessary.²

Most commentators on the subject of jointness at the top will begin their presentation with Lord Ismay's recommendations for the higher defence set up in India. They will also remark how the Ismay committee recommendations must have been comprehensive, since even the Americans asked for his services after World War II. Ismay, it is true made sensible recommendations to the Government of India on the higher defence set-up for a parliamentary form of government, with no integration of the three services, as was the practice in 1945, in the UK. The Ismay set-up was in any case destroyed by V.K. Krishna Menon during his tenure as Defence Minister. So the excellent joint institutions, like the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) which brilliantly handled the Revolt of the Ranas in Nepal in 1949/50, ceased to function effectively after Krishna Menon finished his tenure.³ Today,

the DCC is still an effective institution in the UK, whereas in India it has been overtaken by the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs (CCPA) and Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).

The Americans in the meanwhile passed the Act creating the National Security Council (NSC) and created the post of the National Security Adviser (NSA) in 1947, so any merit ascribed to Ismay in creating the American system was short lived and ephemeral. In the sixties, the UK, faced with the complexities of fielding nuclear weapons, were forced to create a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), and integrate the services headquarters (SHQ) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) into one Headquarters. ⁴The Ismay committee recommendations were therefore overtaken by events and time in both the USA and the UK. In July 2007, the UK also switched over to the National Security Council system after being shaken by the Glasgow bombing scare. The outlines of the UK's NSC are yet to emerge but Prime Minister Gordon Brown has ascribed the need for greater coordination, as the reason for the UK's belated shift to the NSC system.

The UK had occasion to rely on the CDS system in a non-nuclear war in 1982 when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher took the decision to fight for the Falklands Islands and an extremely coordinated joint operations plan was evolved by the CDS. The Falklands war is an important case study, of a Commonwealth country with a parliamentary system, fighting an overseas war, without allies, in a joint manner. The structure, ethos and training of the British forces had been forcibly oriented towards fighting the USSR, as part of NATO and no-one else. The decision making process, higher command organization and conduct of the Falklands war are therefore a valuable lesson in how a joint organisation can cope with an unexpected strategic surprise. The Falklands operation fought under a CDS, is in stark contrast to an Indian operation undertaken less than five years later in Sri Lanka.

Many books that have come out of the Indian experience in operation Pawan and Lieutenant General Depinder Singh's lament⁵ of the inadequacies of the command set-up are poignant. The results of the Pawan fiasco are there for all to see. Within a year of its start, the Air Force (IAF) and Indian Navy (IN) had been reduced to transport services. The IN failed to isolate Sri Lanka, an island. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) failed to provide any intelligence of the departure of Sri Lankan ships from their armaments purchase bases in South-East Asia,⁶ the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) contributed virtually nothing and the force commander did a magnificent job in coordination with the Indian Ambassador in Sri Lanka. These two authorities eventually enabled India to put up a respectable performance

in North East Sri Lanka, assisted by the excellent spirit of the common soldier and officer. The higher command organization failed the country.

The most distinguished soldier to make out a case for jointness was Field Marshal S.H.F.J. Manekshaw, who brought up this subject immediately after his famous victory of 1971. Speaking at the staff college in Wellington, Manekshaw made the telling comment that the area commands in India were dysfunctional, needed to be reduced to joint commands and which would operate under a CDS. Manekshaw's thrust at the time was that the existing service commands had grown organically and historically and were unreal in every other sense.⁷ He was referring to the way in which India would fight its wars in the future. But by the late eighties and early nineties it had become clear that the absence of jointness had begun to cripple national security even in peacetime. The prime factor was technology, with which India was beginning to catch up and which required a common approach by the services and the MoD.

Before going into the current state of affairs, it would be useful to look at the two occasions on which India had to fight, in one case in the immediate neighbourhood, and one in the West Asia. To take the latter case first -- the establishment of the state of Iraq with the help of the Indian Army, in the period between 1915 and 1924, makes a good case study.

It is true that oil had been discovered in Iraq, Lord Jellicoe had converted the Royal (RA) from coal burning to ships with oil fired furnaces. Apart from the unreliable oil from Baku and the long Atlantic route to American oil, here was a rich source, which was made available to the RN's fuel offtake at Haifa from a pipeline running through Syria. Iraq had therefore to become a nation and the forces put together by Whitehall show a level of integration, yet to be achieved in modern India. Under the C-in-C in Iraq, was a political adviser reporting directly to Whitehall, the Royal Air Force and Royal Indian Air Force contingent, a Royal Indian Navy lift capability, and representatives from the Indian Civil Service, Posts and Telegraph, Railways, Education, veterinary and agricultural sciences, judiciary, religious affairs, prisons and the Public Works Department.⁸

The second example is the re-conquest of Burma. With General Joseph Stilwell operating in North Burma, Lieutenant General Claire Lee Chennault running an independent air force in Southern China, and the need to project British Indian power into Burma, the British were forced to accept, what was until then, an American idea – joint command. Although derided as a princeling by the Americans, Lord Mountbatten's South-East Asia Command had an independent land,

sea and air force commander. Of these only the land force commander – Field Marshal William Slim, made an impact upon history. But the command structure set up by India to reconquer Burma – arguably the best land campaign against the Japanese in World War II is another example of a brilliantly successful war, fought in a joint way. Post independence wars offer a poor comparison to the Burma model, and that includes all our wars, including the unfortunate debate that surfaced about the use of the air force in Kargil.⁹ The tragedy about this last controversy is that there is very little to distinguish it from the deathly silence in 1962 on why India did not use air power in a superior tactical situation against the advancing Chinese.

These historical examples are only the necessary background to what must form the core of this paper -- why the absence of jointness is crippling modern India's security strategy? To understand this one must go back to the end-eighties when the Soviets were in Afghanistan, the Cold War was about to end, and Pakistan had become a nuclear power (1987) according to the now infamous A.Q. Khan press interview. With the commencement of the 'Azaadi' campaign of terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir came the Indian decision to weaponise its latent nuclear capability. Pakistan was building ballistic missiles, the secret deal with the Chinese had already been signed by Islamabad and the Soviet colossus was about to collapse, freeing the Central Asian Republics to go their own way. India was on the look out for long-range aircraft, for the first time in the history of the Indian Air Force, the Army was seriously into satellite communications and the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) had just put together a ballistic missile -- the Prithvi, the worst surface- to- surface missile which did not meet the requirements of India's nuclear deterrent.¹⁰

A decade later the strategic world around India had changed forever. The Chinese juggernaut was running full speed, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the Americans had just demonstrated the power of littoral warfare and 'dominance of the battlespace'. It was in this ambience that India became a nuclear weapon power and was confronted with the choices that all nuclear powers have to make - - the crafting of the necessary command and control apparatus. Having spent the Cold War years, whining and complaining about nuclear weapons, the nuclear arms race, nuclear Apartheid and the imminent risk of nuclear war, the Indian strategic community was ill prepared to become a competently managed nuclear weapons power, in its own right. The first hurdle to get over was the route and method to be adopted to bring the armed forces into the picture. Until 1998, their only role had been to dig the holes in Pokhran to receive the weapons to be tested. The second task before the nation was to

define the human and technical aspects of the command and control system.

Upto 1998, the only organization that had any idea of a command and control system were the three Services. The Director General of Military Operations (DGMO's) operations room had been used on many occasions as a national command post, most notably at the meeting to launch Operation Cactus – the brilliant recapture of Male, in the Maldives. The Indian Navy was the most familiar with the technical aspects of creating a cohesive tactical picture, and the air force lived and fought with the Air Defence Ground Environment System (ADGES). But the services were as yet out of the loop, and the bureaucracy, most notably the Cabinet Secretariat was not going to give up without a fight. A Special Secretary was appointed to convene a group to decide on the parameters of a National Command Post and at the first meeting the Chairman made it clear that he had not the faintest idea of what he had been tasked with.¹¹ A few years later, an NSA had been appointed and combined with the post of the Personal Secretary to the Prime Minister. He became the supreme functionary in the land. At this stage, the NSA's office had all the powers and advice to have installed a well crafted command and control system, but over a period of four years, every opportunity presented was allowed to lapse, unexploited.

During these years the services began to slowly grow apart until pulled together by what must be regarded as the best reforms of the post-independence national security apparatus – the Arun Singh committee's work on higher decision making. The other aspect of the first decade was the fact that the pace of institutionalizing the C2 system was not driven by any internal initiative, but the anxiety created by the speed at which Pakistan was putting its act together, and the mounting threat of nuclear collusion between China and Pakistan. The external stimulus forced the NSA to create the Strategic Force Commander (SFC), but to this day, his reporting chain remains as ambiguous as when the post was created. The reason for this was two fold – firstly the post of the CDS was not approved, before the Arun Singh committee was dissolved, and George Fernandes re-entered the Defence Ministry, having survived the Tehelka scandal. Hence the SFC has no senior officer between him and 'civilian control'. The second was that the NSA, who was authorized to have a staff, when first created, put together a secretariat – which still functions as such. The latter failure stems from the civil and foreign office bureaucracy's inability to understand the difference between a staff and a secretariat. Had the first NSA run a genuine staff, including a nuclear staff, the SFC could have legitimately been fitted in under the NSA, at least for its

operational functions. However, the failure of the MOD to create a CDS, and the failure to create a nuclear staff under the NSA, left the SFC, dangling like a puppet on a chain, held by two or three people at the same time.

Behind all these institutional lapses, there is the looming failure of Human Resource Development (HRD). At every level of the government, people who had never read or studied nuclear weapons or nuclear deterrence, suddenly found themselves occupying responsible posts charged with executing a nuclear staff role. The failure affected all levels. Nuclear weapons and nuclear policy, must for instance be conducted with a certain level of transparency, because unlike conventional weapons, they are not meant to 'surprise' the enemy and 'defeat' him. These are common sense conclusions, which an average government officer should comprehend. Yet, to this day there is no commitment to any degree of transparency at any level of government. No responsible nuclear signalling takes place and determine whether deterrence exists or not. The Armed Forces which has custody of nuclear weapons has begun to conduct ad-hoc courses for officers appointed to the SFC. While this is a step forward, what the services actually need is a specialization in nuclear warfare, just like artillery, signals or engineering. This is yet to be discussed. Worse, higher policy is being run by bureaucrats with not even the minimal exposure to nuclear strategy that armed forces officers are given.¹²

There is little doubt however, that the biggest failure to achieve the kind of cohesion that the Pakistan Strategic Planning Directorate (SPD) gives the Pakistani government, comes from a failure of jointness among the Indian Armed Forces. The outer edges of this failure began to emerge in the mid-nineties, when the Army began to seriously look at internal security as its bread and butter. The excessively infantry heavy Indian Army, began to see that power in New Delhi could only come from dealing with what irked the political leadership on a daily basis – insurgency and internal security. Therefore, despite the presence of almost one million para-military troops, and both international and Indian advice that internal security duties would destroy the Army, a certain section of the Indian Army seems wedded to the idea of fighting insurgency as a primary role.

This immediately separates the Army from the Navy and Air Force, neither of which sees any future in fighting Indians as their primary purpose. This also has other deleterious down stream effects. The insurgency fighting section of the Army is cynical about high technology, electronic sensors, data fusion, air power, computers and networking. There is clearly another forward thinking section of the

army that believes in creating a hi-tech army like the one that China is creating – 40 divisions of combat power, but they are in a minority. The Navy sees no future without satellites, networking, electronic warfare dominance and situational awareness and all of it, extra-territorial. The Air Force has long been in a cleft stick. Unable and unwilling to use airpower in fighting insurgents, despite the lapse of eighteen years of the nation's life having been spent on counter insurgency, the Air Force is now committed to winning the pure air war, as a prelude to any other operations -- and they are right in making that choice. But where the Navy and Air Force begin to fall out is the severe territorial limitations of Indian airpower – a condition the Navy is unwilling to accept.

Command, as everyone knows, is a non-starter without communications and in the nineties all the services realized the need to place their primary circuits on satellites. But the Army, first off the mark took the only transponder then available, in the C band while putting in an option for a C+ band later. The IAF was slowest off the mark since a troposcatter system already existed, and territorial static air defence could be managed on land lines. Hence they missed out on the challenges faced by the USAF, which is essentially an expeditionary air force, not having to defend the continental US in any conventional war. The Navy found no satellites with the footprint required of an aspiring Blue water navy. It's only choice was a dedicated satellite with a large foot print,¹³ since its strategic vision was distinctly different from that of the Army and Air Force. The vision of all the three services is now coming to pass in 2007/08, fifteen years after the discussions first began. A tri-service satellite communication system could easily run of the IA's system, which has now opted for a much higher frequency and smaller mobile aerials.

The strategic command's and in a way, the nation's priorities of having a three-tier strategic command communication system has taken a relatively lower priority for the standard reason – that it is driven by officers not nearly as powerful as those driving the communications systems of the individual services. Much of this lacuna should have been ironed out with the formation of the Chief of Integrated Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC), the staff support to the joint office functioning under the CDS. The absence of a CDS has unfortunately cut the CISC off at the knees. This needs some amplification.

The CISC was supposed to integrate three important functions, which individual services were prone to do in their own way, namely, strategic assessment, budgeting and procurement. These were the

same functions that had been centralised in the UK, when that country created the CDS. In addition, the CISC had under him a nuclear staff under a junior three star officer. The first incumbent did a great job, representing the strategic interests of the nation in a tri-command pulling match with the DRDO (makers of missiles) and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The nuclear staff functions of the CISC has now been given up, owing to the lack of authority of the CISC in dealing with authorities 'outside' the services. In the absence of the CDS, this function should have been performed by the chairman, COSC, but clearly some chairmen have shown considerably more commitment in performing their nuclear functions than others.

The consequences are serious for India's nuclear strategy. It is one thing to create a nuclear arsenal, single-mindedly and blindly, on the grounds that that arsenal fulfils the requirements of minimum credible deterrence stipulated in the country's nuclear doctrine. But how does one know whether there is deterrence or not? Most importantly who is this body that makes this calculation for the nation? The doctrine says that the arsenal is under civilian control. But what does that mean? Which civilian authority, institution or officer has the time, expertise and knowledge to conduct an Operations Research study to at least remove the subjective biases in arriving at what constitutes deterrence?¹⁴ Offers were made during the tenure of the first NSA and NSCS to institute such an Operations Analysis body, but were declined.¹⁵

In the meanwhile, there are the disturbing instabilities created by the DRDO and the AEC being part of the strategic decision making group when in fact they operate both as government staff and as defence contractors. The acquisition of the ballistic missile Prithvi should be made into a case study of how the staff requirements system of the services were by-passed into acquiring a missile which did not fully meet the services' essential requirements for effective nuclear deterrence. There was an obvious conflict of interest in DRDO's role as a defence contractor and advisor to the government advocating acceptance of a system produced by it. This is totally unacceptable and has been repeated in the case of the Brahmos. The acceptance of the Brahmos has occurred owing to huge technological backwardness of the services in foreseeing, demanding, specifying staff requirements and overseeing the development and manufacture of strategic systems like ballistic missiles, strategic cruise missiles, satellites for communications, surveillance and map making and the communication and hardware for the National Command Post. Criticism on all these deficiencies bring the constant refrain 'we are getting there'.¹⁶

The services have been extremely competent in demanding specifying and overseeing the development of guns, ships, tanks, radars, sonars and Electronic Warfare (EW) systems, because all these subjects are taught to military officers and there are specialists dealing with such equipment and weapons. Since nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, satellites and advanced systems belong to no single service, there is a frightening ad-hocism in their development and acquisition resulting from the absence of jointness and a CDS. It would not be an exaggeration to say that after 1995, when India became a strategic player, every strategic level acquisition that had joint capability has been a mess, while each service has meticulously managed its own single service acquisition programmes, be it tanks, submarines or aircraft. This neglect has to change.

Change can only come when strategic systems acquire an owner, in the same way that tanks are owned by the armoured corps and submarines are owned by the submarine arm of the navy. Nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles and tri-service systems have no owners today, when in fact the chief owner should be the CDS, the most powerful of all owners. The Indian Army of all the three services, seem to have backtracked on the CDS concept, an idea that all previous army chiefs had fought for. In many ways the disarray in the higher defence set-up is as disappointing as it was in the US when the Goldwater–Nichols Act ¹⁷ was passed and jointness thrust forcibly on the services. But where are the Indian Goldwaters and Nicholse?

The country needs a joint tri-service national security strategy, a requirement that the integrated staff realized and accepts. To write the strategy, a strategic background has to be first written. This has been done. However, the National Security Strategy is currently being attempted by a number of Track two outfits in Delhi, with varying degree of success. In the nuclear arena, the problem is unambiguous and there should be no serious dissension. China has a strategy of tying India down south of the Himalayas, using Pakistan as a proxy. Therefore, unless India acts with determination and urgency, we could end up with a nuclear arms race, the outlines of which are already discernible. The latest act of perfidy and duplicity is in arming Pakistan with a cruise missile (Babur) with a strategic capability (range of 1,000 km), unlike the Brahmos. The Babur harkens back to the Chinese Hong-Niao, which goes back to the Ukranian AS-15/kh-54 which goes back to the American Tomahawk. The Babur will inevitably form the backbone of a first-strike capability, with the Chinese factory made Shaheen II as the long range first strike. The Shaheen I will probably be relegated to a second strike role. China's nuclear strategy is therefore Paksitan's nuclear strategy and we are the victims.

The Indian answer to this carefully crafted collusive strategy is yet to be worked out. The question is, who will do it? Without jointness, the Indian reply has so far been disjointed and haphazard. The earlier technological failings in the joint arena has manifested itself once again in partial acceptance of the Brahmos, a great technology feat, but utterly irrelevant to India's strategic needs. The problem is really that there is no joint strategic input to the political leadership. This is a tragic case of national security mismanagement, and there will be a price to pay.

CONCLUSION

The IA, as the biggest service, turning its back on the CDS and jointness deals a fatal blow to an integrated national security strategy.¹⁸ The matter must therefore, in the national interest, be taken to a higher level – a level above that of inter-service rivalries and squabbles. A good place to begin is where the Arun Singh Committee finished off. Another committee or commission headed by a national level thinker, like K. Subrahmanyam or Arun Singh, or Naresh Chandra needs to be appointed to look into creating the mechanisms for evolving joint national security strategies using the existing framework. This committee, should preferably have Parliament's or the Parliamentary Committee on Defence's backing and support. It should be tasked to look into creating the mechanisms that will pull the services together, institute a strong supportive HRD process to kill single service domination, and identify the accountability for crafting all levels of strategy.□

Notes

1. There is no open literature on these bureaucratic skirmishes but those posted in services headquarters in Delhi would be more than aware of the history of this internal conflict.
2. For a detailed account of the Indian recapture of Srinagar and the Valley, see *Operations in Jammu and Kashmir 1947-48*, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, Thomson Press (India) Ltd., New Delhi 1987, as also Maj. Gen. L.P. Sen, *Slender was the Thread*, (New Delhi, Orient Longmans). For a record of the Tangail paradrop see General J.F.R. Jacob, *surrender at dhaka*, Maohar Publishers and Distributers limited, new delhi, 1997, pp.125-127
3. For a history of the earlier Rana revolt, see Werner Levi, *Government and Politics in Nepal*, *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 18 (17 Dec 1952). For a readable record of the run up to the disastrous Chinese war, read Maj. Gen. D. K. Palit, *War in the High Himalayas* (London: St. Martin's Press and C-Jurst & Co, New York & London).
4. The UK's organization, suited to a Parliamentary form of government is contained in the MoD homepage at www.armedforces.co.uk/mod.

5. Depinder Singh, Indian Peacekeeping Force in Sri Lanka, 1987-89 (Natraj – Dehra Dun).
6. Author's own experiences as the Assistant of Chief of Naval Operations in Naval Headquarters, 1991-93. On one occasion, intelligence passed by the Navy to RAW came back to Navy, a week later as original RAW intelligence.
7. Lecture by General (later Field Marshal) Manekshaw at the DSSC, Wellington, Summer 1989.
8. Soldiers and Statesmen 1914-1918. v.2, Robertson, William, Bart, William London: Cassell, 1926, ix, 327p
9. Bisheshwar Prasad (Ed.), The Reconquest of Burma; Vol-1 (Official history of the Indian Forces in the Second World War 1939-45) Official History. Combined Inter Services Historical Section, India and Pakistan, 1958.
10. A volumetric calculation and hence the size of the Prithvi, compared to the range it achieves places it at near or at the bottom of the surface-to-surface missiles of the world. The large size relative to the range forces the user to carry the extra weight and volume for the entire life of the missile.
11. The author attended that meeting in 1993 as the representative of the NHQ and was appalled at the farce into which it degenerated into. The absence of any kind of a central NCP surfaced again during the Kandahar hijacking when the criminals managed to remain comfortably ahead of the Indian government.
12. Since 2002, ad-hoc courses to armed forces officers have been given by USI of India, by the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi and the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi. The author conducted the first such course on behalf of the USI. No similar courses exist for the civilian bureaucracy.
13. The services requirements of satellite communications are provided by the Army's Signal Corps, which uses a civilian transponder suited to the footprint of civilian use. The Navy's Blue water aspirations requires a much larger foot print and hence the Navy's dedicated communications satellite is currently being built separately.
14. Many analyses show that Pakistan's strategic missile programme is running ahead of India's and hence Pakistan nuclear arsenal may be at a higher level of maturity.
15. A The author offered to run a mathematically based analysis project for the old NSA for quantifiable problems like deterrence, but the offer was declined.
16. There is little doubt that 'we are getting there', but in the absence of jointness there are no mechanisms or organisations to manage the new systems.
17. Attempts to reorganize the US DOD through Congress resulted in Bills that were put up in 1982 and 1982, but were defeated. The reorganization attempt sponsored by Senators Goldwater and Nichols was passed in 1986. Further amendments to strengthen the position of the chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff were made in 1987 and 1989. The final changes resulted in the promotion of all officers in the four services being subject to fulfilling criteria joint service appointments.
18. After having pushed the idea of a CDS for over two and a half decades, the Army Chief in 2006/07, turned his back on the idea, while the Navy chief was the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The Air Force held all along that 'cooperation' between the three services was adequate.