



Civil-Military Relations in India: Role of Military in National Security Decision Making

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Civil-Military Relations (CMR) is an attempt to conceptualise interactions between the civilian (Political/Bureaucratic) leadership on one hand and the military on the other. Samuel P Huntington in his book, *The Soldier and the State* created, for the first time, an organised theoretical framework in the field of CMR.¹ Throughout history, numerous countries have witnessed varying degrees and differing nature in terms of the military's involvement in their country's polity. CMR and the military's role is an important challenge for several countries. While, the strong military and vague politics of the military are rooted in political control, a strong and vibrant relationship creates a policy that is wise in the use of vital and military power for national security.²

India is the largest parliamentary democratic state with the primacy of civilian control over its military. The transfer of power is constitutional and peaceful by means of election organised under an independent Election Commission's supervision. The military leaders of India do not have the right to intervene or engage in political affairs. National security is the most priority for every country in the world. Though the nature and forms of CMR in India could change in the coming years, it continues to be dominated by the civilian leadership and marked by civilian control of the military.

In contemporary India, one of the long-standing debates revolves around the role of the military in national security decision making. In this context, there is a need for adequate mechanisms and platforms that links the civilian and military leadership. This is necessary for a whole-of-government approach to identify India's national security challenges and for the political leadership to outline the national security objectives for military leadership. Such an approach will result in increased interaction, dialogue, and foster 'joint' strategic thinking among the civilian and military leadership and also amongst the services which is necessary for India's growing strategic footprint.

The Indian Government has taken initial steps in this direction by appointing the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). However, the initiative needs to be further strengthened with

greater representation of the military in the formulation of national security policies at the apex level. The military should be members rather than just invitees in the country's apex national security decision making bodies like the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA), National Security Council (NSC), and Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).

This study discusses about two major broad themes: *first*, about the pattern of CMR. It will try to understand the various factors affecting or shaping CMR (like strength or weakness) of political and military institutions, domestic socio-economic and international environment. *Second*, about the military's role in national security decision making. The 'military's role' has been discussed in two sections — one focusing on the 'nature of issues' and the other focusing on the military's role in national security decision making bodies. The 'nature of issues' section discusses the military's role in National Security Strategy (NSS), Foreign Policy, Defence Policy, and Intelligence Agencies. The national security decision making bodies namely the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA), National Security Council (NSC), and Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), etc. have been studied for military's role in India.

Civil-Military Relations in India

After India got independence in 1947, Indian politicians viewed the Indian Army with suspicion as the last supporters of the British Raj. As required, they made a concerted effort to keep the military away from key policy decision making process. In 1962, the war against China was a watershed moment in India's way to deal with defence and strategic affairs. India's poor performance in the War highlighted the negative aspects of civilian leadership wherein before the war, Nehru and Menon had advanced 'politically malleable' Generals expecting them to pursue the risky 'Forward Strategy—' a move that later backfired.³

Over the years, the military's capacity and capability has greatly increased without a major threat to civilian rule. The Indian Military is currently undergoing political and technical changes that may introduce a new phase in both capacity and role. While the Indian Military has clearly dominated the South Asian arena since the 1971 war with Pakistan, however, recent developments could have consequences that expands beyond regional concerns.⁴ Soon the military received operational and institutional autonomy, a fact most visible in the wars of 1965 and 1971.

Since Independence, the military was subjected to effective civilian control in accordance with standard CMR practice. During the 1980s, the nature of Indian CMR began to change with the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government pushing for military modernisation because of Pakistan's re-armament and nuclear program.⁵ Over the past two decades, since

the May 1998 nuclear tests, civilian leadership in India has moved rapidly to put in place a civilianled command and control structure for the nuclear arsenal.⁶ In the aftermath of the 1999 Kargil conflict, the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) was set up to conduct a thorough study of the events leading to the conflict and thereafter suggest measures for shielding national assurance from such prepared interferences.⁷

Veena Kukreja states that, "the problems of low economic development, differences in income, mass poverty, large population, illiteracy, differences based on ethnic, religious and linguistic identity, the existence of a class and caste- class system, do not seem to hinder civilian control over the Indian Military".⁸ Anit Mukherjee, argues that "the current structure of CMR, more accurately described as an 'absent dialogue', has an adverse impact on its military effectiveness. While the Indian state has acknowledged some of these problems and has made some attempts at defence reforms, more forceful political intervention is required".⁹ The absence of any effort for making important strategic and military decisions has often been noted by India's most influential strategic writer— K Subrahmanyam. While Subrahmanyam and others have urged that, "a modern mechanism should be established to develop and implement strategic policy, there is an unwillingness to make the changes necessary".¹⁰ Stephen P Cohen states, "The origins of the Indian Army ranges from its early exploitative role to its performance in World War II when it confronted extreme political and military challenges".¹¹

Furthermore, a vibrant functional democracy, institutionalisation of the electoral process, and smooth & constitutional transfer of power in India, created a delicate balance among the social, political, and economic forces and strengthened the management capacity of the political system. This made it possible to sustain the existing pattern of CMR characterised by the primacy of civil leadership.¹² PR Chari stated that "the important issues in CMR are military interaction with civil population, non-military functions, public image, class composition, external influences, the effect of the emergency, modernization factor, etc".¹³ Although, the nature and form of CMR in India must change over the years, its basic characteristic of civilian control over military apparatus seems likely to continue.

Major Factors Affecting Civil-Military Relations in India

India represents a successful example of a post-colonial country with strong democratic traditions and institutions, as well as a stable parliamentary government combined with widespread public participation and legitimacy of political process and elections. Given the development of CMR in India for more than four decades since independence, one finds

‘institutionalisations’ of civilian supremacy over the military, despite its socio-economic status of a developing country.¹⁴ Various factors affecting CMR in India are briefly discussed below.

Political Institutionalisation

Political institutionalisation is influenced by different factors such as mass political leadership and political parties, legitimacy of political parties, functioning democratic institutions, and free & fair elections. In the role of mass political leadership and political parties, India witnessed a long period of one party dominance under the Congress Party and since 2014 under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).¹⁵ Under Prime Minister Modi’s leadership, several important steps have been taken for better coordination between the civilian and military. India’s political leadership is most confident in its institutional perception within its military and democratic framework.¹⁶

In the early years of Independence, the expansion and modernisation of the armed forces were limited as it was feared that, excessive powers in the hands of the armed forces would lead to the militarisation of society. Stephen P Cohen argued that “the structure of the Indian CMR is fundamentally sound because for most Indians the legitimacy of the political system remains high”.¹⁷

Despite myriad challenges, India has managed to achieve democratic consolidation. Sumit Ganguly states that, “any dispassionate assessment of India’s democratic success points to few important reasons, like the adoption and maintenance of a system of free and fair elections, regular alternation of the parties, a range of viable political parties across a wide ideological spectrum, an open and vibrant press, an apolitical and professional military, and fiercely independent judiciary”.¹⁸

India is a stable democracy that has managed to institutionalise civilian control like other democratic countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan, etc. Here, civilian control has been enforced over all areas of CMR, a situation that is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.¹⁹ Therefore, India’s democratic function is stable since its independence. However, challenges have existed with political institutions but still, civilian control of the military is supreme and there has not been any efforts by the Indian Military to take over political power. Therefore, CMR in India, is possible because of a stable political institutionalisation process.

Military Institutionalisation

India has the world's second-largest military force and third-largest defence budget. In August 1947, India's military strength was about 0.4 million, but the political leadership was ready to reduce the military's strength further to reduce defence expenditure. After the war in 1947-48, various military troops were discharged and the Indian Army's strength decreased by 0.2 million.²⁰ In 2018, India had about 1,395,100 active military personnel, including 1,200,000 Army, 85,350 in the Indian Navy, 127,200 in Indian Air Force, and 9,550 in the Coast Guard.²¹ In 2019, India's population was 1,311,559,204 out of which total military personnel comprised of 3,551,550 and active military personnel are 1,455,550.²²

In the early 1960s, India expanded its military expenditure dramatically following its defeat in the India-China War of 1962.²³ India's military defeat by China in 1962 prompted an increment in defence spending and an expected extension of military service. On the contrary, Pakistan accorded high priority to its defence sector since its Independence.²⁴ According to the annual report of MoD 2018-19, "The Armed Forces epitomises the ideals of service, sacrifice, patriotism, and the country's composite culture. Recruitment to the armed forces is voluntary and open to all citizens of India irrespective of caste, class, religion, and community, provided the laid down criteria's —physical, medical, and educational, are met".²⁵

In India, professionalism of military service has always followed a comprehensive system of officer training.²⁶ Ali Ahmed and Srinath Raghavan agrees that India's civil-military relationship is qualified as the highest civilian practice on military policy; participants considered political tensions that could impact the military's professional, ethical, and secular nature.²⁷

The military has also come to the aid of the civil authorities in times of breakdown of law and order.²⁸ During the Kerala floods in August 2018, the Army provided aid for carrying out relief and rescue operations. The Indian Air Force launched 'Operation Karuna' for rescue and medical relief in areas ravaged by devastating floods on 18 August 2018 in addition to the Navy which launched 'Operation Madad' to provide relief to the people affected by the flood.²⁹

The Domestic Socio-Economic Factor

The history and colonial legacy of India stressed upon a theory of CMR that placed great emphasis upon 'separate spheres' of military and civilian influence, while ultimately civilian

control was acknowledged. According to NC Guha, “The role of religion noted that the organisation and composition of the Indian Army are highly secular and apolitical”.³⁰

Internal disruption as a domestic socio-economic factor like the Naxalite uprising, religious extremism, drug trafficking, cyber threats, border terrorism, etc. is a major internal challenge for India's national security. The cooperation of civil and military is important in preventing such disruptions. The military should be involved in decision making to prevent the internal threats. Therefore, an effective coordination between civil and military would, make it easy to handle internal threats.

International Environment

India's growing military environment, economic instincts, and better relations with countries like the United States, Russia, and other major power, and our political leadership has been rightly positioned India. Since, India gained independence in 1947, it has fought five major wars —four wars with Pakistan and the 1962 War with China. While all these wars were caused by territorial disputes, the end of the war was mainly influenced by internal causes and contemporary international situations.

Role of the Military in National Security Decision Making

In every nation state, the military is stationed to protect the country from external aggression and internal dissatisfaction. Prime Minister Modi's efforts to address such problems are timely. This is because China has taken several steps over the past two decades to build up and modernise its military, strategic capabilities, and command & control structure. As Harsh V Pant and Kartik Bommakanti argues “In foreign policy, as a result of this modernisation and changes in force structure, the Chinese military has an increased capacity to carry out complex tasks over the Tibetan Plateau and along the Sino-Indian border heightening Indian concerns”.³¹

The former Chief of the Army Staff, General VP Malik stated that “Due to the large communication gap between what is politically desirable and what is being planned by the military, India's armed forces are kept out of the national security loop and were not adequately consulted by the government on operational and strategic matters”.³² However, India's military role in the national security decision making process are slated for major higher defence reforms currently taking place under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. One such change is the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). However, it is important that political leadership invests time and continues with this with an aim to clearly define the

role and responsibilities of the CDS and give the requisite political support to the CDS to execute changes to incorporate each of the services' within the Ministry of Defence.³³

The role of the military in national security decision making has been discussed in two sections. *Firstly*, the role of military in NSS, Foreign Policy, Defence Policy, and Intelligence Agencies. *Secondly*, the military's role in National Security Decision Making Bodies like the NCA, NSC, and CCS.

Military's Role in NSS, Foreign Policy, Defence Policy and Intelligence Agencies

National Security Strategy (NSS)

Despite the absence of a written document outlining India's national security policy, Indian political leadership has time and again, announced the broad contours of such a policy in the Indian Parliament. India is the only country of its size and importance in the world today without a NSS document. Brigadier Gurmeet Kanwal opined that "a comprehensively formulated NSS reflects the national will to protect and promote national interests pertaining to security".³⁴ He further defined that, "achieving self-reliant in critical weapon technologies is important for India's NSS. Other important NSS that needs to be instituted includes those of maritime and energy security, food, water, and environmental security".³⁵

Under the Modi government, national security has received prime importance. This has been witnessed with the appointment of the CDS. In the 21st century, as India's national security threats keep growing— from internal security challenges like the Kashmir issue, northeast, leftist extremism, transnational terrorism, etc. to regional security challenges from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka and the wider region in China. Despite an active debate on national security issues in the media, think tanks, and many other forums, the Indian political leadership and government has been hesitant to release the NSS.

Foreign Policy includes political and diplomatic relations with other countries. India's Foreign Policy comprises a wide range arena— mainly civilian, political, economic, technological, and cultural activities as opposed to narrower defence concerns associated with the military. The major activities includes primarily civilians in foreign policy decision making mechanism like the Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of External Affairs, etc. Nitin Pai stated that "without a new foreign policy that combines diplomatic and military power, India will face a rapid, profound change in the world order, a balance of power and regional balance, and liquid international relations".³⁶ Both China's rise and its global reaction have turned international relations into a competition where the use of coercion is on the rise.³⁷

The role of the military in foreign policy also includes the establishment of state relations at various levels. Former Indian Foreign Secretary, Shri Kanwal Sibal stated that “the several dimensions of Military Diplomacy, which is the core function of diplomacy, the military has a role that goes beyond security and defence of the country against external threats and spills into avoidance of conflict and promotion of peace, building sustainable cooperative relationships and trust, perception management, changing mindsets, clarifying elements of our foreign policy to interlocutors and generally improving understandings with those they interact with externally”.³⁸ As a result, the role of the military in foreign policy in India is not formally seen. However, an important question is whether the military could have a greater role in the formulation and implementation of our foreign policy?

Defence Policy

The current Defence Policy Management System of India prioritises the control of elected politicians and civilian bureaucrats at the top of the system on building a unified and coordinated capacity within the MoD. On 10 May 1995, the then Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao stated that, “we do not have a document called India’s National Defence Policy. But we have got several guidelines which strictly followed and observed”.³⁹ Admiral Raja Menon had noted that, “The Annual Defence Report of 1997-98 has many welcome changes and for the first time, the notion and ‘sacred territory’ has been watered down. In all the previous years, the role of the armed forces was depicted purely and solely as the ‘defence of our territorial integrity’, exhibiting a mindset that was not conducive to understanding coercive diplomacy, the manipulation of risk and the threat of military action”.⁴⁰

From the above discussion, it is clear that in India, civilian control over the military has transmuted itself into bureaucratic control over the armed services. In addition, India’s acquisition process is hampered by lack of expertise within the civilian bureaucracy, including insufficient number of researchers on military operations and system analysts. Till here

Intelligence Agencies

The role of the military in intelligence agencies is also limited. Currently, two intelligence agencies are engaged in providing intelligence on military issues viz. Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) and the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA). In R&AW, there is very low representation of military personnel whether serving or retired. The DIA was set up after the Kargil Review Committee recommendations, however its role in India’s intelligence

apparatus is yet to see its full growth. The Army, Air Force and Navy of India also have their respective intelligence wings.

Military's Role with Respect to India's National Security Decision Making Bodies

Nuclear Command Authority (NCA)

India's NCA is responsible for directing, controlling, and making effective decisions regarding India's nuclear weapons program. India's Nuclear Doctrine is characterised by excessive secrecy and non-involvement of the armed forces. Nevertheless, without involvement of the armed forces, an effective command & control system is not possible. The Indian Armed Forces have expressed their displeasure on this practice many times and also, argued that the same could turn counterproductive.⁴¹ In January 2003, the Government of India announced that it had approved the Doctrine. Later reviewed the CCS stated that, civilian leadership will also be responsible for making a nuclear decision"⁴² The CCS also elaborated that the NCA would have a Political Council and an Executive Council. It also declared to appoint a Commander-in-Chief of the Strategic Forces Command (SFC) to manager and administer all the strategic forces.⁴³

After the nuclear test of 1998, there has been greater military involvement especially in nuclear force structure and successful delivery of nuclear weapons. It is also essential for the Government of India to consult with the C-in-C, SFC for nuclear targeting and also for the availability of nuclear warheads.

The power of decision making about the number of nuclear warheads, nuclear force structure, and doctrine lies with political leadership. In national security, decision making body—the NCA is dominated by civilian bodies. The post of the CDS was created in January 2020, The CDS will be a four-star General and Principal Military Adviser to the Defence Minister. In India's context, the major problem in the sphere of decision making comes from the absence of an integrated, tri-service approach.

National Security Council (NSC)

In order to fulfill the vacuum in higher defence management of the country, the NSC was established in 1998-99. It includes the Prime Minister of India, the MoD, Minister of Home Affairs (MHA), Minister of Finance (MoF), and Minister of External Affairs (MEA). The National Security Advisor (NSA) is the Executive authority.

India being a de facto nuclear power, could not afford to ignore vital issues that impacts its security. As per D Shyam Babu, the 'national security management requires integrated

thinking and coordinated application of the political, military, diplomatic, scientific and technological resources.⁴⁴

Ironically, the military hoped that the creation of the NSC would facilitate a greater role for the military in security planning and policy implementation. In the NSC, the Chiefs of Staff is the member at the bureaucratic level and the Armed Forces are represented by the Defence Minister at the apex level. A related issue, very often raised by serving and retired service personnel, is the need to ensure that the civilian control over the military does not stretch beyond a limit. Civilian supremacy is not only a laudable objective but the cornerstone of CMR in any modern state. In India's NSC, out of seventeen members, thirteen are civilian and four are military, making it a civilian dominated body.

Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)

In most Parliamentary Systems of the Government, important decisions on issues of national and international affairs are taken by the Cabinet. The CCS was constituted by the then Prime Minister— Shri IK Gujral in 1997. It is headed by the Prime Minister, and comprises the MoD, MHA, MoF, MEA, and the NSA. The CCS is again a civilian dominated body.

Conclusion

The growing strength of militaries in post-colonial societies and Pakistan military's growing influence in the aftermath of its independence had made Indian leaders concerned about maintaining civilian control over the military. India's military has little role to play in economic matters or policy; it does not have any political interests and does not have much role in foreign policy issues. With respect to issues surrounding India's National Security, the military leadership plays limited role in the decision making bodies. However, with the appointment of the CDS it is likely that the military will play a larger role in the country's national security decision making apparatus and policy making processes.

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End Notes

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