

*This article is forthcoming in the November 2012 issue of Defence and Security Alerts.*

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## **Civil-Military Relations in India The Soldier and the Mantri<sup>1</sup>**

by

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### **The Curzon-Kitchener Imbrolio**

Between April 1904 and August 1905, an intriguing incident occurred in the governance of the Raj, the tremors of which are felt to this day. The then Viceroy Lord Curzon, emphasizing the need for dual control of the Army of India, deposed before the Secretary of State, at Whitehall, imputing that the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Kitchener was “subverting the military authority of the Government of India” (almost as if) “to substitute it with a military autocracy in the person of the Commander-in-Chief.” This was in response to Kitchener having bypassed the Viceroy and placing a minute before the home Government where he described the Army system in India, as being productive of “enormous delay and endless discussion, while the military member of the (Viceroy’s Executive) Council rather than the Commander-in-Chief, was really omnipotent in military matters.” He further remarked that “no needed reform can be initiated and no useful measure be adopted without being subjected to vexatious and, for the most part, unnecessary criticism, not merely as regards the financial effect of the proposal but as to its desirability or necessity from a purely military point of view.”<sup>2</sup> In the event, both Viceroy Curzon and the Military Member of his Council, Sir Elles, on receipt of the Imperial Government’s direction subordinating the Military Member to the Commander-in-Chief, resigned.

Indeed times are different, the Government then was an imperial one, India was a colony to be exploited, its material capital defended and the monarchy was at its zenith. Yet, the Viceroy’s largely unencumbered authority was challenged successfully, to all intent and purpose, by the military face of British India. Curzon

had shot his bolt when he emphasised superior dual control of the army which in effect asserted operational control bereft of accountability; while Kitchener of Sudan brought to the debate indisputable military experience and underscored the criticality of unity of command without which the army would be condemned to bureaucratic meddling and operational impotence (the ultimate check and strategic orientation, at any rate, would remain with the Secretary of State and the India Council at Whitehall).

Delving into the Commander-in-Chief's mind, it was clearly the closed loop of the 'responsibility-accountability and therefore authority' chain that was in danger of being subverted and replaced by a skewed system that neither had the competence to fully understand the utilisation of the military and yet exercised operational control over it, nor the tradition to stand accountable for its actions. It is this hapless legacy that periodically surfaces whenever independent India has been faced with a situation when the application or even the preparedness and posture of military power could perhaps have provided resolution or, indeed, deterred an armed conflagration.

### **The Nature of the Indian Military: The Sum of Misplaced Fears**

Independent India was founded on the belief that the Anglo Indian services (which included the Military and the Indian Civil Service that conventional wisdom suggested was the steel frame of empire) was neither Indian, nor civil, nor provided service of any import to India.<sup>3</sup> The civil services in this setting was nimble enough to morph into the Indian Administrative Service and in time to politicize and adapt to a context that nurtured sycophancy, redefined the idea of authority sans accountability and found virtue in the ills of a fragmented society.<sup>4</sup> In all this forgetting the words of Lord Wavell when he declared "The English would be remembered, he believed, not by this institution or that, but by the ideal they left behind of what a district officer should be (of providing justice and sympathy to the Indian peasant)."<sup>5</sup>

The military on the other hand, noting that its strength lay in its apolitical tradition, professionalism and of loyalty to colours and constitution did not make any attempt to either deconstruct its ethical foundation (to India's benefit) or seek to play a more enduring role in nation building and in national security decision making (to its abiding distress). In the causation of a newly independent nation confronted by a variety of mortal security challenges the latter lack of impulse posed an awkward dilemma which as events unfolded, only served to elbow the military establishment to

the status of an a 'attached' office, to be heard only when consulted shorn of any part in strategic decision making. Why this came to pass is a question that is not easily answered, but clearly two dynamics were at play, the first was the misguided fear of a 'Kitchener redux' and therefore the misplaced trepidation of military control of the state and the second was a flawed belief that civilian control of the military not only implied superior dual control by the politico-bureaucratic alliance but also a self fashioned conviction that military matters were essentially of execution and had little to do with policy making or strategic planning.

### **A General Theory - Societal Values and Military Imperatives**

Civil-military relations describe the correlation between society and the military institutions founded to safeguard it from threats both external and internal. Clausewitz, very insightfully, saw in military activity an orientation that was not only directed at "material force" alone; but also saw an impetus towards "moral forces which give it life" by which is meant all the psychological factors which include civil-military relations that in fact emphasise that military activity is a continuation of policy by other means.<sup>6</sup> In a more comprehensible and narrow sense civil-military relations portrays the association between the political dispensation of a society and its military establishment.

Even in theory, this correlation generates two dynamics that shape military institutions. The first of these is characterized by societal values that tend to make military action increasingly ineffective as that social order becomes ever more liberal; while the second dynamic is one that shape military institutions purely by violent functional imperatives that provide the logic for arming forces and using it either to coerce or in hostile action. The intensity with which these two forces collide is determined largely by the extent to which security needs bear on societal values. Balance is not an inevitability in this conflict.<sup>7</sup> The dilemma of civil-military relations is to seek stability within this framework.

To illustrate, if we were to analyse the civil-military correlation in India and in China against two attributes of efficiency and coherence of response we would find that in India's case, where societal values overshadow all else, the nation is often swayed by its democratic mores, cultural traditions, historical and pluralistic ideals to fully realise the significance of its military as a direct consequence of which there is a persistent undertone of friction and unease in the relationship which fails to recognise

that the professional soldier is in fact a subordinate and supporting partner of the statesman. In turn, this manifests as a lack of cohesion, tardiness in response and a general inefficiency in attaining a decisive strategic posture, the aftermath of the terror attack on parliament and 26/11 are symptomatic; while in China it is the intensity of security concerns that prevail, as a result of which central authority in the civil-military connect is far less polarised and enjoys heightened focus, the rapid adoption of strategies such as ‘Access Denial’, ‘The Assassin’s Mace’ and an anti satellite programme are indicative.

### **The Indian Context an Atypical Paradigm**

The military in the Indian context is uncharacteristic for a variety of reasons. If two were to be singled out these would be; firstly, its apolitical training and tradition of allegiance to flag and constitution and secondly, its lack of vigorous involvement in the independence struggle which in the main was driven by a political movement motivated by rules made by the colonists and holding non-violent beliefs . Yet in Clement Atlee’s words lie an awkward irony; he reportedly stated that the two most important reasons for the haste with which the British left India were “the Indian National armies activities of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, which weakened the very foundation of the British Empire in India, and the Royal Indian Navy mutiny which made the British realise that the Indian armed forces could no longer be trusted to prop up the British.”<sup>8</sup> The disproportionate impact of such an underplayed role ought to have suggested to our founding fathers the enormous power potential that a well harnessed military represented rather than rekindling anxieties of a Kitchener encore. A direct consequence of the latter disquiet was the deliberate putting in place structures that kept the military far removed from strategic security decision making.

The formulation of national security strategy, as Julian Corbett pointed out, is “neither a substitute nor a surrogate for judgement and experience, but is a means of fertilising both.”<sup>9</sup> In amplification, the process must obviously embrace those professional departments of government that are the institutional repository of wisdom and understanding of the field. From this standpoint to have deliberately left out the military from strategic decision making only speaks of the estrangement and disaffection that pervades civil-military relations. The perils of alienation became

evident in several embarrassing instances of national and military ignominy that unfolded soon after independence. These will be discussed later in the paper.

### **The Quest for Definition**

The essence of civil-military relations is the energy that it potentially gives to policy. Recognising this Sun Tzu (544-496 BC) the Chinese military general, strategist and philosopher declared that “order or synergy within a State’s (security) organisation provides it with “*Shih*” translated to mean ‘force’, ‘authority’, influence or ‘energy’; an essential ingredient for success while disorder spells failure.”<sup>10</sup> The arena for civil-military relations is strategic and its burden is the potential or, indeed, the actual application of force with violence that it may entail in order to achieve political ends. For the establishment to be in denial of both domain and purpose of the correlation is to effectively stunt the drive and advancement of the State to its rightful place amongst nations.

The narrative, of this much misread dimension, of nation building in India begins with the circumstances of independence. Bellicose imperial legacy of the previous two centuries and the calamitous effects of military adventurism in Europe and East Asia in the first half of the twentieth century had left in Prime Minister Nehru an abiding undertone of aversion to matters military. This despite the fact that within the first year of nationhood the Indian army had in Jammu and Kashmir assured that the instrument of accession was championed, the Pakistan army and tribal militias vacated in a bitterly fought campaign and a Line of Control established; while in September 1948 Operation ‘Polo’ was launched to integrate the princely State of Hyderabad into the Indian Union. But it must be said that to a very large extent resolute action and control of the military (with discerning understanding of the correlation between the civil and military) was exercised in both instances by the exertions of Vallabhai Patel, the then Home and Deputy Prime Minister.<sup>11</sup>

At independence, Mountbatten’s legacy was a three tiered control edifice for civil-military correlation with the Prime Minister and his cabinet at the apex and the Defence Ministers Committee along with the Chiefs of Staff Committee forming the other two tiers. This structure, unsurprisingly, took inspiration from the then defunct ‘Committee of Imperial Defence’ to form the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (chaired by the PM with the Chiefs of Staff as members along with key ministers and secretaries) with the declared purpose of creating a structure that could not only

provide civil-military correlation and cater for the needs of higher defence management but also to develop a strategic vision, formulate military strategy, and provide planning support to implement strategy and realise vision.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically it was to be supported by the Defence Minister's Committee, the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the Joint Planning Committee and the Joint Intelligence Committee. In concept this presented a very robust civil-military framework. However, by 1949 the controlling element of the structure, the Defence Committee of the cabinet became defunct leaving the supporting elements headless and, perhaps more critically, putting a ceiling on their ambit as defined by the operational level.

Why such a turn of events occurred is not entirely apparent, nor have the reasons for bringing about a precipitate closure to a perfectly compelling system been recorded. Unauthenticated reports suggest that it was General KM Cariappa, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief's verbal forays in the field of policy making and strategic security matters that triggered the premature demise of the system. Then again, clearly it was the dominant persona of Nehru, his anti militaristic disposition, his flawed obsession with internationalism and allure of nonalignment (in a milieu that was driven more by opportunism than idealism) that must have had much to do with the decision. The larger consequence of the absence of a controlling stimulus to civil military relations was the inability to articulate a strategic vision that linked with policy and to promote long term planning and force development that serve to implement and attain a strategic posture and in turn influence the future.

As India trundled into the 1950s to find itself on a canvas that was dominated by the two 'Cold Warriors' it was armed with little else than the towering character of Nehru, his romanticism over the virtues of non-alignment and its teeming millions. Despite the gloom of failing economic policies (growth during the decade averaged a dismal 3%), the depressing prognosis of a nuclear holocaust and disturbing militaristic concerns in the region; it was critical to come to grips with two distinct problems both of which had significant bearing on security policies. First, the existing world order was unwilling to stomach a hypocritical approach to taking sides in the cold war between the power blocs and the many proxy wars that it had fired up. Second, the simmering unresolved border question with both China and Pakistan on account of historical aberrations that formed a part of baggage of the partition award. Though the predicaments appeared separate they were in fact linked by the precedence India conferred on her own statehood, sovereignty and national interests. Flawed civil-

military relations saw to it that neither was reverential adherence to the forlorn non-aligned policy corrected nor was there a serious attempt at exploiting early opportunities to resolving the border question.<sup>13</sup> In addition, given that there was far less tolerance amongst states to the asymmetries of power, there were no long or even short term strategic military options placed before civilian authority.

Against this backdrop a controversial episode that underscored the state of civil-military relations comes centre stage when the army Chief General K.S. Thimayya offered to resign in September 1959. Thimayya's resignation was sparked off by a disagreement with Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon over the promotion of senior army officers. However, the archival evidence now available shows that the reasons for the resignation ran deeper. Just a few weeks before the affair, Indian and Chinese forces had clashed along the eastern frontiers. To counter the growing threat from China, Thimayya wanted the political leadership to consider seriously the proposal mooted by President Ayub Khan for joint defence arrangements between India and Pakistan. Nehru had previously turned this down, as it would imply forsaking non-alignment. Menon, too, was opposed to this course. Thimayya broached this matter and others directly with the prime minister and was assured that he would discuss the issues with Menon. When things did not progress, Thimayya sent his resignation. The prime minister naturally saw this as a step to force his hand on policy issues. Nehru managed to persuade Thimayya to withdraw his resignation without giving him any assurances. But by this time the issue had been leaked to the press. When questioned in Parliament, Nehru played it down as arising out of temperamental differences. Nonetheless, Nehru's concerns were obvious when he stressed that 'civil authority is and must remain supreme.'<sup>14</sup> Palpably in this setting, that 'civil authority' meant unilateralism, was implicit.

Unilateralism in the formulation of military strategy botched calamitously in the 1962 war against China. It brought into stark contrast the relative efficiency with which the First Kashmir War was planned, coordinated and waged and so too the competence with which civil-military planning and action brought about the integration of Hyderabad into the Union. The Government of the day faced harsh criticism despite enjoying an overwhelming majority. The primary condemnation was the woeful neglect of defence preparedness, an unreal approach to international relations, particularly with China, and the dangerous inadequacies of higher defence management significantly the intrusive, extemporized and incompetent manner in

which civil-military relations had evolved. President Radhakrishnan went on to censure the Nehru government declaring that they had been “crude and negligent about preparations.” Lack of preparedness of the military was blamed on the Defence Minister who had to demit office. Nehru assured the Rajya Sabha on 09 November 1962 (during the three week lull in fighting) “People have been shocked, all of us have been shocked, by the events that occurred from 20 October onwards, especially of the first few days, and the reverses we suffered. So I hope there will be an inquiry so as to find out what mistakes or errors were committed and who were responsible for them.”<sup>15</sup>

The Chief of Army Staff, who was designated to conduct the inquiry, labelled it as an ‘Operational Review’ and set five terms of reference. First, adequacy and potential of training for high altitude warfare; second, material and equipment appropriateness; third, system of command; fourth, physical fitness of troops and lastly, capacity of Commanders to influence the men under their Command.

Going by the scope of an ‘Operations Review’ and the terms of reference handed down, these would suggest that the aim of the convening authority was to deliberately limit and strait-jacket the investigators to the operational level of the conflict. This may even have been understandable, given that the Army Chief had been deliberately relegated to that level. However, conventional wisdom and military analytical tradition will advocate the need to start a scrutiny of this nature with an understanding of the political direction, strategic posture, preparation and higher military decision making in the run-up to war and its prosecution. Leaving the Inquiry divorced from the functioning and decision making at service headquarters, ministry of defence and indeed by the cabinet of ministers headed by the Prime Minister (where decisions on strategic orientation and the political direction of the war were made), was not only to castrate the Inquiry, but was also to insinuate that all was well in the realm of higher defence management and civil-military relations. Facts had made it pretty apparent that it was here that an inquiry was most needed. The Supreme Commander’s terse censure of the Prime Minister and his Government had underscored where the fault lines ran.

The inquiry took the form of the Henderson Brooks and Bhagat Report which was presented to the new Defence Minister Mr Y.B. Chavan on 02 July 1963. Earlier in April, in reply to a question in Parliament, he affirmed that Army Headquarters had already instituted measures to implement the lessons to be learned based on the terms

of reference of the report. These included quality of planning, air-land cooperation, training for high altitude warfare, depth of officer man relationship, focused intelligence service and the creation of a chain of strategic airfields.<sup>16</sup> What was conspicuous in its omission was a statement on the blemishes in higher defence management, the failings in the political direction of the war and ‘courtiership’ being promoted in the military. He also mentioned that the contents of the report in its entirety were not being disclosed for considerations of security.

On 02 September 1963, an intriguing statement was made by the Defence Minister in Parliament, he disclosed that the Inquiry Committee had not confined its investigations to operations alone but had also examined the “developments and events prior to hostilities as also the plans, posture and the strength of the Army at the outbreak of hostility.” Further, that a detailed review of the actual operations had been carried out “with reference to terrain, strategy, tactics and deployment of troops.” He also summarised the main recommendations of the report sticking to the terms of reference (which by now was well known) and later (on 09 September) in a statement on defence preparedness, he confirmed that changes were underway which encompassed expansion, reorganisation, modernisation, development of comprehensive infrastructure and enhancing operational efficiency. The value and effectiveness of these sweeping changes were soon to be confirmed during the wars of 1965 and 1971 against Pakistan.<sup>17</sup>

What remained disturbingly unanswered was the out-of-mandate areas that the report addressed with regard to “developments and events prior to hostilities, strategic posture and plans, which must be taken to have included civil-military relations, higher defence management, decision making and the political direction of war.” In 1963 to divulge these may well have compromised national security, but to persist through time is to invite long shadows to loom over the military establishment.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Mystifying Continuity**

Even after the passage of fifty years we note that the fixing of liability for the 1962 debacle remains unfulfilled despite the four thousand plus casualties (killed, wounded, missing), the humiliation, and indeed the loss of credibility. The report remains under a shroud. In 2008 India’s Defence Minister Mr A.K. Antony told Parliament that the Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report could not be declassified because its contents “are not only extremely sensitive but also of current operational

value.” Half a century on it is challenging to comprehend what the report could contain that would warrant such sarcophagal silence.<sup>19</sup>

The perpetuation of this inability to bring about change that reflects and recognizes that ‘civil-military correlation provides energy to policy’ is long overdue. The skewed nature of the association may be directly linked to four recent happenings. First, the curious sacking of the Chief of Naval Staff on 30 December 1998 based on a hastily compiled ‘booklet’ by an Additional Secretary that had pretensions of being a ‘White Paper’ (it was distributed to all MPs) which invoked Article 310 of the Constitution that officers serve at the pleasure of the President. Primary reason apparently was the officer’s refusal to brook bureaucratic interference and high handedness in service matters.<sup>20</sup> Second, the Group of Ministers that reviewed the national security system in the wake of the Kargil conflict 1999 recommended the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) so that civil-military correlation could be put on an ‘even keel’ and the military perspective would be reflected at the strategic level of warfare. While successive Service Chiefs have themselves to blame for not having followed up with the necessary vigour for petty reasons of turf protection and internal incoherence, the office most affected would have been the Defence Secretary who currently perpetuates and plays at being the de-facto CDS with no liability to that office. Third, the Group of Ministers also recommended the integration of service headquarters into the Ministry of Defence. This while given lip service has not happened. Service headquarters continue to be treated as attached offices to service the Ministry of Defence as hitherto. Responsibility and accountability for operational matters remain with the military while controlling authority and higher defence decision making resides in the Ministry of Defence. And lastly, the recent General V.K. Singh age fiasco could well have been resolved discreetly without compromising integrity of the Army. This was not done and there is reason to believe that behind the scenes civil-military tensions ensured that the matter, by design was allowed to rupture in public.

## **Conclusion**

India has faced many traumatic events since 1947 that have had critical impact on security of the nation including five wars, insurgencies, gory terrorist acts, periodic crumbling of the law and order mechanism and even a period of authoritarian rule; but what stands out is a lack of strategic vision instigated by a distorted civil-military

correlation. India's military is characterised by an apolitical nature and exults in its professionalism. It responds best to objectivity in purpose and control as can only be provided by a synergic relationship between the civil authority that defines policy and the military that gives to policy the necessary energy. The First Kashmir War and the integration of Hyderabad into the Union provided us with an acute insight of how the correlation ought to work; in these episodes, the primary virtue visible was that development of policy and the force to back it form a unity.



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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Mantri is a word of Sanskrit origin meaning sage, it is used for a variety of public offices. It is also the root of the English word mandarin for an official of the Chinese empire.

<sup>2</sup>“The Curzon-Kitchener Controversy,” *Outlook*, 19 August, 1905, pp. 941-2. Free access online via [www.unz.org](http://www.unz.org) and *The Gazette of India Extraordinary*, 23 June 1905, available online.

<sup>3</sup>Nehru, Jawaharlal. “*Glimpses of World History*” Lindsay and Drummond Ltd. 1949, pg 94.

<sup>4</sup>IAS the late PN Haksar, doyen of the IAS and a close confidant of the Nehru family in the keynote address to the Naval Higher Command College in 1988, speaking on civil military relations suggested that the “only progression for a bureaucrat was if he hitched his wagon to a politician” whether this was said in resignation, matter of factly or as an objective reality was never entirely clear, yet what was, was that the apolitical nature of the Administrative Services as a governing principle had suffered a premature cardiac arrest.

<sup>5</sup>Mason, Phillip. “*The Men Who Ruled India*”, Pan Books 1985, pg 399.

<sup>6</sup>Clausewitz, Carl Von. “*On War*” Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton University Press 1976, pg 86,87 and 137.

<sup>7</sup>Huntington, Samuel P. “*The Soldier and the State*”. Harvard University Press 1957, the interplay between societal values and the functional imperatives of the military is a recurrent theme in Part 1 between pg 2 and 102.

<sup>8</sup>The Tribune on line edition, February 12 2006. Clement Atlee the British Prime Minister who presided over India's Independence in conversation with PV Chuckerborty, Governor of West Bengal in 1956 as extracted from a letter written by the latter on 30 March 1976.

<sup>9</sup>Corbett Julian S. “*Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*”, Longmans Green and Co. New York, Bombay and Calcutta 1911, pg 8.

<sup>10</sup>Sun Tzu. “*The Art of War*”. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith, Oxford University Press, New York 1963, pg 92-93.

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<sup>11</sup> Gandhi, Rajmohan. *Patel: A Life*. Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad 1990, pg 455 and 480.

<sup>12</sup> [www.ids.nic.in/history.htm](http://www.ids.nic.in/history.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Offer made by Premier Zhao en Lai in a letter to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1959, *The Sino-Indian Boundary Question* (enlarged edition), Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1962, pgs 47-50.

<sup>14</sup> Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years*.

Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2010, pg 267-269.

<sup>15</sup> Noorani, AG, *Publish the 1962 War Report Now*, The Hindu, e-paper, 12 July 2012, Opinion.

<sup>16</sup> Arpi, Claude, *The War of 1962: Henderson Brooks-Bhagat Report*, Indian Defence Review Vol 26.1 Jan-Mar 2011

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Extracted from authors article titled *The Ghosts of Henderson Brooks and Bhagat* first published in the September 2012 issue of Defence and Security Alerts.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Bhagwat, Vishnu, *Betrayal of the Defence Forces: A Soldiers Diary*. Manas Publication 2001. The fact of bureaucratic officiousness is a recurrent theme.