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CIVIL-MILITARY DISSONANCE:
A CHINK IN INDIA'S ARMOUR

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It is a great pleasure for me to be delivering this evening's K Subrahmanyam Memorial Lecture. He is someone whom I have always held in great esteem and I would like to thank the Global India Foundation for having given me this privilege.

There must be many in this audience who counted Shri Subrahmanyam, affectionately dubbed "Subbu", as a friend, mentor or guru. As a wandering seafarer, who had few postings in Delhi, I cannot, regrettably, lay claim to any of these distinctions. However, having followed and benefitted from Shri Subrahmanyam's writings and speeches, for many decades, I have been a long-term admirer.

Consequently, soon after taking over as Chairman Chiefs of Staff in 2005, I sought out Sh. Subrahmanyam; who was known, in the strategic community, as the 'ideological champion of India's nuclear deterrent'. He was gracious enough to accept my invitation, and we spent a couple of hours chatting over cups of tea in Navy House. His lucid analysis of arcane issues ranging from nuclear physics and deterrence strategy to geopolitics and international relations left me deeply impressed. Subsequently, I had the privilege of meeting and hearing him, often, and his intellectual brilliance as well as clarity of thought never failed to amaze me.

Subbu's vision of a strong, secure India, guided the national security discourse for nearly half a century. Civil-military relations figured frequently in this discourse, and he was constrained to describe the current paradigm as one in which; *"politicians enjoy power without any responsibility, bureaucrats wield authority without any accountability and the military assumes responsibility without any direction."*

With that pithy quote, typical of him, ladies & gentlemen, I dedicate this evening's talk to the memory of Shri K Subrahmanyam.

Introduction

There can be no doubt in the mind of any Indian – civilian or soldier - that the primary task before the nation, today, is to accelerate development. All our energies and resources must be devoted to lifting millions of our countrymen from abject poverty and providing them food, housing, health, education and so on. And yet, in spite of this crying need, we are compelled to divert huge resources to defence. This year's defence budget was over two lakh crore rupees or 37 billion USD and, regardless of the state of economy, it is going to keep growing at between 5%-10% annually.

Much of it will be spent on arms purchases from abroad; and this poses a moral dilemma for a poor developing nation like ours. However, we need to balance sentiment with historical reality. It has always been a perception of India's weakness that attracted repeated foreign invasions, and the same factor has tempted our neighbours to undertake frequent military adventurism in the past six decades. The harsh reality is that we do not have a choice between 'guns' and 'butter'; and that the opportunity cost of national security is worth paying.

As our politicians start writing election manifestoes they need to figure out if our colossal defence expenditure actually buys the security that we need. At the same time, the common man, too, must ask some pertinent questions, such as: are India's core national interests being safeguarded; are our borders and territories inviolate; and are our citizens adequately protected from the all-pervasive threat of terrorism?

Unfortunately there are no clear-cut answers. A reality-check will show that the reassurance that we derive from our large conventional forces and expensive nuclear arsenal may be misleading, because our flawed national security structure is incapable of coping with multifarious emerging threats. One of the major causes of this is the failure of successive governments to integrate the organs of state which contribute to national security and strategic policy-making.

A primary fault-line in the existing system is civil-military dissonance. In the next 40 minutes or so, I will attempt to trace the complex dynamics of the civil-military equation whose roots lie, as much in political science and sociology as in history and philosophy. My endeavour is twofold; firstly, to provide an insight into the nature of the civil-military relationship, and its flaws, and secondly, to highlight some of the consequences of the existing dissonance. Towards the end, I will also offer a few recommendations.

Civil-military Relations

It is universally recognized, except, notably, in India, that civil-military relations form a fundamental part of national security policy. In fact, a major objective of this policy, according to social-scientist Samuel Huntington, is to develop a system of civil-military relations which will maximize national security with the least sacrifice of other social values. This requires a complex balancing of power between civil and military groups. Nations, such as India, which fail to achieve a stable pattern of civil-military relations squander their resources and run uncalculated risks.

The history of civil-military relations does not go back too far in time. In the old days the political and military leadership of a state tended to be identical, since it was the king or prince who was not only policy-maker and ruler, but also commanded armies in battle. These armies were officered, either by mercenaries who considered war a business for profit or by aristocrats for whom it was a hobby and adventure. The military as a profession did not exist.

The credit for professionalizing the officer corps goes to the kingdom of Prussia, which undertook drastic military reforms after its defeat by Napoleon in 1806. Entry standards for officers were laid down for the first time, institutions for higher military education were founded and promotions were mandated on the basis of merit rather than birth. All this and the creation of a General Staff laid the foundation of a professional officer corps and furnished the template on which all modern armies are based. What distinguishes today's military officer from the warrior of earlier times is his professionalism; and that is what gives a special slant to the issue of civil-military relations and topic of civilian control.

Despite its frequent mention in discourse, the term 'civilian control' lacks a satisfactory definition. Samuel Huntington proceeds on the hypothesis that this concept is based on 'relative power' and that the key to establishing civilian control is: firstly, to keep the military politically sterile and secondly, to maximize civilian power vis-à-vis military power. Given the large number and conflicting interests of civilian groups, it is impossible to maximize civil power as a whole, and the inevitable question that arises is; which civilians are to do the controlling?

Civil Control in the Indian Context

The question of civilian control in the Indian context has a different connotation. In India's unique system of democracy, a layer of civilian bureaucracy has interposed itself

between the political leadership and an isolated military establishment. The term 'civil-military', thus, implies a three-cornered relationship encompassing political and bureaucratic players on one hand and the military on the other. This relationship has, over the years, evolved into a triangle of discord, tension and indifference; whose most damaging impact has been a stasis in national security affairs.

Elsewhere in the world, the pursuit of war has demanded equal attention from soldiers as well as statesmen, diplomats and bureaucrats. This has not been the case in India, because for two centuries preceding 1947 wars were fought by Indian armies, at home and abroad, on behalf of their British colonial masters; and Indians had no involvement in imperial planning or strategies. Thus, while Indian soldiers acquired priceless battle-field experience, neither they nor any civilians learnt much about higher direction of war.

For the past six decades, however, India has been an independent nation-state, and this, coupled with the fact that we are heirs to a substantive cultural past, requires us to undertake some introspection. An examination of the factors that have shaped our strategic culture and fashioned Indian attitudes towards the military is, thus, necessary.

Strategic Thought and Status of the Military

In 1992, George Tanham, a RAND Corporation researcher, stirred a hornets' nest with his monograph on *Indian Strategic Thought*; a study that highlighted the role and status of the military in India as a manifestation of lopsided strategic thinking. Commenting on "tight civilian control of the military", Tanham points out that India has pursued this policy to a point, "where the military have almost no input at all in the formulation of higher defence policy and national strategy."

Exploring the genesis of this approach, he refers to post-independence India's deep pacifism and the strong anti-military attitude of its rulers. He attributes it, largely, to the perception that the army did not take part in the nationalist movement and was an instrument of British oppression. Consequently, he says, Prime Minister Nehru, "...neglected the military, giving it few resources and downgrading its top leadership....while increasing the status and pay of both civil servants and the police." While it is true that the Indian army did render loyal service to the British crown, the contribution of our soldiers to the freedom struggle and its aftermath was common knowledge in India and no contemporary politician could have remained ignorant. But let me elaborate on this a little.

The string of early British defeats in North Africa and SE Asia, in WW II, saw Indian prisoners of war in Singapore, Germany and Italy eagerly answering the call of Subhash Chandra Bose to fight for India's freedom. Consequently, 3000 Indian POWs were formed into the Free Indian Legion as a unit of the German Army, and in Singapore 40,000 out of 45,000 POWs joined the Indian National Army.

In 1943, Bose established a Provisional Government of Free India, in Singapore which formally, declared war on the British Empire. INA units fought alongside the Japanese 15th Army in its invasion of India which ended in failure. Although the armed forces never mention this subject we need to take note of the series of mutinies, in early 1946, by sailors of the Royal Indian Navy, with units of the RIAF, the army's Signal Corps and EME joining their naval comrades in revolt against the British. All these events, involving Indian military personnel, at home and abroad, not only inspired and galvanized Indian freedom fighters, but also struck deep fear into British hearts, and hastened their departure from India.

In the difficult post-Independence phase, apart from tenaciously holding on to Kashmir Valley and helping integrate recalcitrant princely states, the armed forces also played a sterling role during the violent upheaval of partition. Over the years, as our glaring strategic naiveté repeatedly led to adventurism by our neighbours, it has invariably been the courage and patriotism of the armed forces which safeguarded India's integrity and upheld the nation's honour.

Tanham wonders at the Indian politician's irrational fear of a military coup, and points out how this has led to the military leadership being deprived of even basic discretionary powers. In a passage worth quoting in full, he adds: "In effect the Services have been downgraded in status and taken out of the national security decision-making process, while the MoD civilian staff has grown in prestige and power and controls almost all military activities and programmes...bureaucratic opposition has prevented the formation of much needed institutions like a CDS as well as development of a national strategy."

There has been little substantive change in the 21 years since Tanham undertook this analytic assessment of India's strategic culture and status of civil-military relations. In order to acquire a better understanding of how we reached such a juncture, it is necessary to, briefly, trace the evolution of our higher defence organization.

Lord Ismay's Legacy

In 1947, the Government of India asked Lord Ismay, Mountbatten's Chief of Staff, to evolve a system of higher defence management, which would meet the emerging needs of the newly independent nation. Ismay, conscious of the fact that no radical measures could be contemplated at the delicate juncture of partition, came up with a pragmatic solution that called for the least amount of turbulence. This interim organization was to serve till a proper system could be developed to suit Indian conditions.

The Ismay model recommended a C-in-C for the operational management and administration of each Service, and a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) for central coordination between the three Services. The COSC was to be the highest body for rendering advice to the Defence Minister and government. It was to be supported by a series of other inter-Service committees to address details of coordination. To facilitate quick decision-making and cut red-tape, civil servants were embedded in each committee as members, and its decisions were not to be subject to further detailed scrutiny by the MoD.

The Civil Service Intervention

This interim higher defence management system had the potential to evolve in many alternative ways. The Service Headquarters (SHQ) could have become separate departments of the MoD. Alternatively, they could have integrated themselves completely with the Department of Defence. Even if no changes were made, the integrated civil-military committees had adequate decision-making clout to ensure streamlined functioning of the MoD/SHQ complex.

However, none of this happened, and within a short period of the new system being implemented, senior civil servants intervened to replace the concept of 'civilian supremacy' with a distorted version which actually established 'bureaucratic control' over the armed forces. This was done by the simple expedient of designating the three SHQ as 'Attached Offices' of the Department of Defence. This gave them a status exactly on par with organizations such as the Railway Protection Force, CRPF and CISF etc.

The Services found that as Attached Offices, they were placed outside the Ministry, which they could approach only through the medium of files. The administrative effectiveness of the Service Chiefs steadily eroded, to the point where their recommendations to the RakshaMantri (RM) began to be routinely sent for scrutiny and comment down to the Director level.

Attempts at Reform of the System

For 50 years the armed forces lived with this iniquitous and dysfunctional system, and it took the near disaster of Kargil to trigger some introspection. The degree of alarm created by occupation of Kargil heights by Pakistan in 1999 was enough for the GoI to constitute the Kargil Review Committee headed by none other than Shri K Subrahmanyam.

Only a person of his experience, intellectual ability and moral courage could have undertaken such a comprehensive and objective analysis of the Kargil episode. The report pulled no punches when it observed that this crisis had arisen due to "grave deficiencies in India's security management system", and pointed out that, "India is perhaps the only major democracy where the Armed Forces HQs are outside the apex governmental structure". These and other scathing indictments prompted the government of the day to constitute a Group of Ministers in 2000; tasked to undertake a review of national security.

Having undertaken a comprehensive examination of shortcomings in national security, the GoM, in February 2001 rendered its report which contained some critical recommendations relating to reforms in higher defence management. However, the ruling NDA coalition apparently lost its nerve and only a cosmetic implementation of these well-considered recommendations was undertaken. An historic opportunity to redress national security shortcomings was, thus, squandered.

Twelve years later, in mid-2011, another Task Force on National Security Reform was constituted under the chairmanship of a seasoned former bureaucrat. This *suomoto* initiative by the Cabinet came as a surprise, and raised hopes that the UPA government was perhaps earnest in seeking long overdue reform in national security.

As the only individual to have been a member of both the 2000 and 2011 Task Forces, it was my personal observation that the security conundrums and lacunae confronting both the bodies remained, substantially, the same; nor had the mindsets and attitudes of bureaucrats as well as politicians undergone any change over the past decade.

The report of this Task Force was submitted to the Prime Minister, with due ceremony, in May 2012; but nothing further has been heard on the subject. With the bureaucracy resolved to maintain *status quo ante*, and the politicians lacking the stomach to take a position on national security issues, the fate of this report was, perhaps, a foregone conclusion.

An Atmosphere of Suspicion

From the discussion so far, it would be obvious that right from independence the relationship between the military, on one hand, and the politico-bureaucratic establishment, on the other, has been brittle and laden with suspicion. In order to ensure that the relative balance of power remained firmly in favour of the civil side, the politicians have progressively strengthened the bureaucracy at the cost of the military. Thus, military folklore is replete with instances where this calculated relegation has manifested itself in a series of unsavoury incidents.

For example many recall the famous snub delivered by Pandit Nehru when Gen Cariappa, warned him of the Chinese threat in 1951. Cariappa was told; *"It is not the business of the Commander-in-Chief to tell the Prime Minister who is going to attack us where. In fact the Chinese will defend our eastern frontier."* Nehru's staunch support for the abrasive Krishna Menon led to the public humiliation of another gifted soldier, Gen. Thimmyya, over his resignation offer in 1957. It was, in fact, Menon's arrogance and micro-management of military affairs that led to inappropriate selections for army leadership positions and our defeat and humiliation by the Chinese in 1962.

In more recent times, the first signs of India's deep civil-military schism came into the public domain in 1998. A difference of opinion between a Service Chief and the RakshaMantri snowballed rapidly into a confrontation, resulting in the unprecedented dismissal of the Navy Chief. The years 2011 and 2012, too, have been notable for the huge predicaments faced by the MoD, and the damage inflicted; both on the armed forces and on the larger national security establishment.

The eruption of two major controversies demonstrated, yet again, not just the widening chasm between the military and politico-bureaucratic establishment, but also the sheer incapability of the latter to cope with crises of this nature. In the first instance, the serving Army Chief, nursing a personal grievance, for which he failed to receive satisfaction from MoD, took the remarkable step of seeking redressal from the Supreme Court. To the embarrassment of the military and discomfort of the public, many unsavoury details of the case were leaked; to be dissected in newspapers articles and TV studios.

While all this was going on, the armed forces were suddenly 'ambushed' by a prominent newspaper editor who splashed a report in banner headlines suggesting that an incipient military *coup d'état* had been uncovered. Although both the PM and RM issued belated denials, it was clear that a clumsy attempt had been made to plant suspicion about the loyalty of India's armed forces in people's minds. A deeply disturbing aspect

of this episode is the suggestion that media could not have dared to concoct such a preposterous canard without a nod from the establishment.

The irony of the situation is that the current paradigm, for management of national security, seems to deliberately exclude experts. The politician, as a rule, has found it expedient to detach himself from national security matters, because of his belief that they do not win or lose votes. He devotes himself to politics and places total reliance, for advice, decision-making and problem resolution, on the non-specialist MoD bureaucrat. This, despite the Service Chiefs and the SHQ staffs, being available for professional advice on defence and security related issues.

A better system of higher defence management and a less adversarial civil-military relationship could certainly have averted many of these episodes. On the other hand, a strong political personality in South Block, too, could have defused most of them.

These were, however, issues of an inter-personal nature, and we need to look at some of the serious systemic anomalies and the severe penalties they inflict on national security.

A Half-empty Arsenal

Foremost amongst these, is our failure to attain self-reliance in production of weapon systems and the heavy price of our abject dependence on external sources. Not only does the cost of imported systems, spare parts and ammunition keep escalating at exorbitant rates, even their availability remains unreliable and unpredictable; thereby eroding combat readiness.

The root of this debility lies in the subordinate status of the Service HQs which precludes them from having a say in DRDO's developmental programmes. This organization is free to decide its own priorities and to conduct research in technologies which are, often, unrelated to operational needs of the armed forces. Since the military has no voice, and the bureaucracy lacks the necessary knowledge, the scientists do exactly what they please; with no accountability for meeting time, cost or performance targets.

Similarly, the vast public sector defence-production complex, under the supervision and total control of a non-technical bureaucracy, has succeeded in misleading the nation with spurious claims of 'indigenous production' and 'transfer-of-technology'. In actual fact, all they undertake is assembly of kits and licensed-production; and even here their poor quality-control often takes a toll of the lives of our servicemen. As a direct

consequence of all this, India has become the world's biggest arms importer; and yet its arsenal remains half-empty.

Lagging Modernization

The second damaging consequence of the military's isolation from MoD is the interminable delays that bedevil the processing of cases; whether they relate to acquisition of hardware and ordnance or to infrastructure and manpower accretions. Each case emanating from the SHQ is required to be steered through multiple layers of bureaucracy that exist in four departments of the MoD as well as its Finance Division.

Queries are sequential, repetitive and often raised to prevaricate; and every file movement takes weeks, if not months. Adherence to these processes has not only thwarted force modernization, inspite of recent reforms in procurement procedures, but also affected combat readiness.

Were the SHQ to be brought into the MoD and functionally integrated with it, all the expertise would be available under one roof; thus eliminating the need for queries on file. Such integration would not only enable collegiate discussion around a table, but also bring domain expertise to an uninformed MoD. And that brings me to my next point.

An Un-informed MoD

With dwindling budgets there is a dire need for prioritizing the Services' demands for weapons, hardware and manpower 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 and relevance for a capability projected by a Service, against the prevailing threat scenario. The proposal for a capability-acquisition must not only be justified by the sponsoring Service, it must also stand in the face of competing claims from other Services. The military modernization process must take into account the full spectrum of options available in the land, maritime and aerospace domains,. It must not be seen as trying to meet the aspirations or enhance the prestige of one Service or the other.

In the current set-up, generalist MoD civil-servants lack the necessary experience and expertise regarding military hardware and force architecture, to critically examine the

validity of demands by the Services. Absent a system of consultation with the armed forces, the preferred solution for the un-informed bureaucracy is to cast the case in limbo. That is why delays ranging from 5-15 years are fairly common and modernization remains stalled.

Impediments to Civil-Military Integration

Given the deleterious impact of the civil-military divide and the vitiated atmosphere that has resulted from it, we need to examine the sources of impediment to integration.

Major resistance to change comes from the civil services which have resolutely stalled every attempt at integration of the SHQ with MoD, since they apprehend erosion of their influence and authority. They are stubborn in their conviction that advice to the politician must come only from the bureaucracy, whose role in decision-making is the, putative, key to 'civilian control' of the armed forces. The bureaucrats maintain that the SHQ are best retained as Attached Offices of the DoD, and further integration is neither necessary nor desirable.

Cross-posting of officers between the MoD and SHQ was suggested, but does not find favour with the bureaucrats because, they argue that the Service officers deputed to MoD would either be of poor caliber or not serve their civilian superiors 'loyally'. At the same time, they are quite clear that it would be *infra dig* for an IAS officer to serve under a military superior. The creation of a specialist cadre of civil servants to serve in national security related billets is rejected because it would be an impediment to the career prospects of rising IAS stars. The consensus is firmly in favour of *status quo*.

The Indian politician is intuitively aware that there are serious flaws in the national security structure, but political survival remains his first priority. His comfort level with the bureaucrat being high, he is happy to leave the management of defence and security matters in his hands. At the same time, he is ill at ease with the soldier and, contrary to all empirical evidence, ready to believe murmurs - possibly originating from bureaucratic or intelligence sources - about the dangers of a praetorian military.

For these reasons politicians have, conveniently, used the contrarian arguments emerging from political circles, the bureaucracy and even from within the military to block reforms that seek to enhance the cohesion, jointness and combat efficiency of the armed forces - or indeed free them from bureaucratic strangleholds.

The Solution?

Resistance to change is a known phenomenon world-wide and that is why defence reforms in all major democracies have invariably been pushed-through by a visionary political leadership. The best example of such political activism is the USA, where lawmakers, deeply concerned about national security issues, have ensured that systemic reforms are periodically legislated through radical laws such as the National Security Act 1947 and the Goldwater-Nichols Act 1986.

Far more important than this is the fact that US lawmakers have unambiguously outlined, in the US Code of Federal Laws, the functions of the armed forces and their combatant commanders. The US Code provides the legal basis for the roles, missions and organization of each of the services as well as the department of defence. By way of contrast, no military functionary, including the three Chiefs, finds mention in any context, in the GoI Rules of Business. Instead, the rules assign the responsibility for defence of India and for the armed forces to the Defence Secretary.

It is entirely up to India's lawmakers and politicians to muster the time and comprehension to take a call on the issue of national security reform. If their wisdom informs them that civil-military dissonance has, indeed, created an urgent need for reforms in India's national security structures, there are a number of options that they can exercise:

- Reports of the 1999 and 2011 Task Forces on security reform can be resurrected and studied afresh to ascertain why certain recommendations were not implemented and whether they can be implemented now.
- A fresh committee/task force can be constituted exclusively for examination of civil-military relations as they pertain to national security, with the mandate to suggest amendments to the GoI Rules of Business. The aim being to eliminate ambiguities and sources of internal conflict and streamline functioning of the MoD.
- The best option would be to set up a Parliamentary committee for drafting of an Armed Forces Act which clearly defines the 'national security pyramid' and spells out the responsibilities of and relationship between all its functionaries, including the Service Chiefs, and between its constituents departments and offices.

None of these suggestions is new or radical, and given the indifference of India's leadership to national security issues and their overwhelming pre-occupation with

politics, it would be unrealistic to expect any movement in the near future. What happens, post elections-2014 is anybody's guess.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me point out that the stubborn adherence of the politico-bureaucratic elite to an archaic and dysfunctional system of defence-management has cost us dearly in many ways. I have just enumerated the serious functional penalties that it has inflicted on national security. The prevailing asymmetry in civil-military equation has also embittered relations; and the Services are, rightly or wrongly, convinced that the bureaucracy is engaged in a continuous endeavor to denigrate and belittle them.

So much so that even Veteran ex-Servicemen squarely blame a hostile MoD for their woes. The callous and insensitive manner in which the MoD bureaucracy has handled problems relating to pensions of the nation's, three-million, Veterans, war-widows and battle-casualties is truly appalling. Coupled with sustained political indifference, this has served to confirm the worst suspicions of the soldiery. Grabbing the headlines, currently, is a MoD directive that mandates contesting of all cases relating to financial benefits of battle-wounded in the Supreme Court!

In a region full of militaries with political aspirations, the Indian armed forces have remained untainted by political stain or ambition. In our chaotic democracy, the military has been, and will remain, the most trustworthy instrument of the Indian state in every national crisis. It, therefore, makes no sense for the government to harbour unjustified suspicions of disloyalty and then use them as an excuse to perpetuate a flawed and dysfunctional national security system.

PM Manmohan Singh, in his address at the Combined Commanders' Conference in November 2013, significantly, called for establishment of "the right structures for higher defence management" and for "the appropriate civil-military balance in decision making". The right structure for higher defence management is obviously one in which the armed forces are integrated with the MoD, and the appropriate civil-military balance will be struck only when they are allowed participation in national security decision-making. The fact that recommendations of successive groups of ministers and task forces have been cast into limbo speaks volumes of a helpless and myopic polity and an obdurate bureaucracy.

However, the fact that the head of government has openly admitted these shortcomings may hold out some hope; perhaps post-elections 2014.