

ISSUE PERSPECTIVE

*“Unlocking the full potential
of the U.S.-India relationship”*

Vol. 2, Issue 4

November 2012

Defense Reforms in India: Slow but Steady Progress

Gurmeet Kanwal

The recent report of the government-appointed Naresh Chandra committee on defence reforms in India has once again focused attention on the hollowness of the national security decisionmaking process and the urgent need for change. This is the second time since the Kargil conflict in 1999 that the government has initiated the process of reform in the national security decisionmaking apparatus.

Defense planning in India has been marked by knee-jerk reactions to emerging situations and haphazard single-service growth. The absence of a clearly enunciated national security strategy, poor civil-military relations, failure to commit funds for modernization on a long-term basis, and suboptimal inter-service prioritization have handicapped defense planning. With projected expenditure of US\$100 billion on military modernization over the next 10 years, it is now being realized that force structures must be configured on a tri-service, long-term basis to meet future threats and challenges.

Systemic Weaknesses

India's national security decisionmaking system suffers from several systemic and structural weaknesses. Unlike in the United States and in other major democracies, it is not seamlessly integrated between the political leaders, the civilian bureaucracy, and the military leadership. For example, India does not have a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or a chief of Defence Staff (CDS) at the apex with integrated tri-service theater commands or unified combatant commands. Consequently, even though India is a nuclear-armed state, the national security decisionmaking system does not enable the prime minister and the defence minister to get “single point military advice.” The political leaders must consult with all three service chiefs and may have to contend with varying views in moments of crises. During the early days of the Kargil conflict with Pakistan in 1999, the views of the army and air force chiefs on the employment of air power were different and led to delay in decisionmaking.

The chief of the Army Staff (COAS) and his naval and air force counterparts wear two hats simultaneously. They are commanders-in-chief of their respective services, as well as the chief planners. The three services headquarters are not truly integrated with the Ministry of Defence (MoD); hence, long-term perspective planning is undertaken on a single-service basis for all practical purposes. Though there is a National Security Council headed by the prime minister, it seldom meets as the political leaders are unable to devote time to long deliberations; consequently, long-term defense planning does not get the attention it deserves. The Nuclear Command Authority has no military representation in the Political Council headed by the prime minister; the three chiefs of staff are members of the Executive Council chaired by the national security adviser. In fact, the military leadership has relatively little say in India's national security decisionmaking at the apex level. As a result of these anomalies, the decisionmaking system is flawed and though efforts have been made to improve it, much more needs to be achieved.

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Post-Kargil Defense Reforms

After the 1999 Kargil conflict, the Kargil Review Committee headed by the late K. Subrahmanyam was asked to "...review the events leading up to the Pakistani aggression in the Kargil District of Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir; and, to recommend such measures as are considered necessary to safeguard national security against such armed intrusions." Though it had been given a very narrow and limited charter, the committee looked holistically at the threats and challenges facing the nation and conducted an in-depth examination of the loopholes in the management of national security. The committee was of the view that the "political, bureaucratic, military and intelligence establishments appear to have developed a vested interest in the status quo." It made far-reaching recommendations on the development of India's nuclear deterrence, higher defense organizations, intelligence reforms, border management, defense budget, use of air power, counter-insurgency operations, integrated manpower policy, defense research and development, and media relations. The committee's report was tabled in Parliament on February 23, 2000.

The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) constituted a Group of Ministers (GoM) to study the Kargil Review Committee report and recommend measures for implementation. The GoM was headed by Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister L.K. Advani. The GoM set up four task forces on intelligence reforms, internal security, border management, and higher defense management to undertake in-depth analysis of various facets of the management of national security. After the reports of these four task forces had been studied by it, the GoM recommended sweeping reforms to the existing national security management system. On May 11, 2001, the CCS accepted all the recommendations made by the GoM. Among others, the CCS approved implementation of the following key measures:

- The post of chief of Defence Staff (CDS), whose tasks include inter-services prioritization of defense plans and improvement in jointmanship among the three services, was approved. (However, a CDS is yet to be appointed—ostensibly because political consensus has been hard to achieve and there are differences among the three services on whether or not a CDS is necessary.)
- Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) was established with representation from all the services.
- A tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command and a Strategic Forces Command were established.
- The tri-service Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) was established under the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC) for strategic threat assessments.
- Speedy decisionmaking, enhanced transparency, and accountability were sought to be brought into defense acquisitions. Approval of the Defence Procurement

Procedure (DPP 2002) was formally announced. The DPP has been amended several times since then.

- As part of the DPP, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) and the Defence Technology Board, both headed by the defence minister, were constituted.
- Implementation of the decisions of the DAC was assigned to the Defence Procurement Board (DPB).
- The National Technical Research Organization (NTRO) was set up for gathering electronic and other technical intelligence.
- The CCS also issued a directive that India's land borders with different countries be managed by a single agency like the Border Security Force. The concept of "one border, one force" was adopted.
- The CCS nominated the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) as India's primary force for counter-insurgency operations.

Ten years later, many lacunae still remain in the management of national security. The lack of inter-ministerial and inter-departmental coordination on issues like border management and center-state disagreements over the handling of internal security are particularly significant. In order to review the progress made on implementation of the proposals approved by the CCS in May 2001, the government appointed a Task Force on National Security on June 21, 2001. The Task Force was led by Naresh Chandra, former cabinet secretary and former ambassador to the United States.

Recommendations of the Naresh Chandra Committee

Over a period of one year, the Naresh Chandra committee had wide-ranging consultations with various government bodies, but it does not appear to have consulted strategic studies think tanks and independent experts with specialized domain knowledge. Though the report of the Naresh Chandra committee has not been made public, the recommendations purportedly made by the committee have been appearing in spurts in the press in recent months.

These recommendations are incremental rather than revolutionary. According to news reports, the committee has urged the government to ensure adequate military preparedness to deal with a militarily more assertive China. By far the most salient recommendation of the committee is to appoint a permanent chairman of the present CoSC—that is, another four-star post in addition to the army, navy, and air force chiefs of staff. This falls well short of the inescapable operational requirement of appointing a CDS and simultaneously creating integrated theater commands for joint warfare in future conflicts. While a permanent chairman of the CoSC will certainly be able to better coordinate the modernization plans of the three services and improve the management of tri-service institutions than a rotating chairman, he will have no role to play in integrating operational plans for joint warfare. The

solution lies in the establishment of tri-service integrated theater commands with Cs-in-C who report to the CDS, while the chiefs of staff of the three services are primarily planners responsible for recruiting, the raising and equipping of new units, acquisition of weapons and equipment, and specialized training and maintenance.

Other recommendations of the committee include the creation of three new tri-service commands to better manage future challenges and vulnerabilities: Special Operations Command, Aerospace Command, and Cyber Command. The establishment of a Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs to deliberate on security issues having foreign policy implications, the setting up of an Advanced Projects Agency along the lines of the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) under the scientific adviser to the defence minister to oversee defense research and development (R&D), the posting of additional armed forces officers to the MoD and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and civilian Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers to the services headquarters for better integration and coordination have also been recommended. The committee has recommended an increase in foreign direct investment

(FDI) in defense joint ventures from 26 percent at present to 49 percent. All of these recommendations are unexceptionable and, if implemented, will go a long way toward overcoming present shortcomings.

Systemic weaknesses and structural shortcomings in India's national security decisionmaking system have led to suboptimal synergization of the available combat resources, meager as these are. The Indian government must accord the highest priority to the implementation of the recommendations of the Naresh Chandra committee so that the country's armed forces are well prepared to meet future threats and challenges and are in a position to contribute to security in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region along with India's strategic partners.

Brigadier (Ret'd) Gurmeet Kanwal is an adjunct fellow with the Wadhvani Chair in U.S.-India Policy Studies. The views expressed in this publication are solely those of Brigadier (Ret'd) Kanwal and do not represent the views, positions, or conclusions of CSIS.

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