

Essay

Securing the Nation: The Indispensability of Institutional Synergy

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*Absence of a network of institutions working together closely,
is perilously undermining management of India's national security*

Dealing with India's emerging national security challenges requires an accurate appreciation of threats and timely action to meet them, especially since the security scenario is becoming increasingly complex. The global and regional balances of power are shifting, creating new challenges. The rise of China and the growing nexus between China and Pakistan are obvious challenges. India's asymmetrical comprehensive national strength vis-à-vis China, too has huge security implications. Non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, cyber security and terrorism have become more potent. Economic security is central to India's national security metrics. The role of oceans in India's security and development has also grown. Maritime security is the new frontier that needs focused attention. India has also to safeguard its vast assets in space and on the ground and develop a proper space security policy. Internal and external security challenges are interlinked. A comprehensive, regular assessment of these growing challenges is required.

India needs a coherent institutional approach to deal with such a vast array of security challenges. Such an approach is followed in countries such as the US. The US has had a National Security Council (NSC) since 1947 which regularly publishes its national security policy. Many other countries have also in recent years set up NSCs to assess their foreign and security policies regularly. India should do the same. The government tried to address the situation by

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creating the NSC in 1999, when a holistic approach to national security was first taken. The NSC, an advisory body, has been in existence for nearly 20 years but it does not publish any national security assessment or policy paper. It is a good time to review its overall functioning and make the changes necessary to make it more effective.

In order to deal with the multiplicity of threats, challenges and risks, a critical appraisal of the institutions managing national security is essential. The institutions of national security in the present form do not lend themselves to multi-disciplinary coordination and synergy. This is the main inhibiting factor that comes in the way of creating an efficient system of national security.

The Institutional Arrangement

In the Indian context, security is handled primarily by the Ministries of Defence, Home, External Affairs and their agencies and affiliated institutions. The Cabinet Committee on Security is the highest body for taking decisions on national security. The Prime Minister's office also plays a critical role in this area. The states are responsible for their own law and order. However, such neat divisions of responsibility are not conducive to dealing with national security challenges that are cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary.

Apart from the ministries, multiple agencies are involved in dealing with national security issues, albeit in a piecemeal fashion. The principal national security institutions are: the army, the navy, the air force, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), the police, intelligence, space agencies, and institutions dealing with science and technology, infrastructure and economy. In addition, there are vital organisations such as the Ministries of Commerce, Industry, Energy and Power, the stock market, banks, and agencies dealing with white-collar crimes. In brief, national security today cannot be seen in isolation from other aspects of national development. Security and economy are becoming increasingly inter-twined.

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Following the Kargil war, the Kargil Review Committee suggested a comprehensive review of national security and suggested the way forward for reforming the national security management systems. The government set up four task forces for intelligence, defence, internal security and border management reforms. The recommendations were studied by a group of ministers (GOM), who came up with over 300 recommendations that were placed in the Parliament for a comprehensive reform of the national security architecture. Some recommendations were implemented and others were not. The creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was one recommendation on which the government has yet to take a decision. In 2012 the Naresh Chandra Committee on National Security reviewed the implementation of the GOM report and made further suggestions and recommendations. The government also set up various committees to look into specific aspects of national security, and they too made several recommendations.

In brief, there has been no dearth of recommendations on how to reform the national security management system and make it more effective. However, the implementation has been tardy. Often this has been due to lack of political will. This is certainly true of a major recommendation like the institution of a Chief of Defence Staff to improve coordination and synergy between the different wings of armed forces, as well as between the armed forces and the government. In the meantime, new security challenges have emerged. We need new approaches and new institutions to deal with these challenges.

The experience of the last 20 years shows that institutions are critical to the management of national security. Many new institutions have been created in recent years. These include: Integrated Defence Staff (IDS), National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), National Information Board (NIB); Nuclear Command Authority, Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), Multi Agency Centre (MAC), National Cyber Security Coordinator (NCSC), and the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) to name a few. Many existing institutions such as intelligence organisations, central armed police, etc., have been strengthened. The expenditure on internal security too has gone up ten times during 2000-2018. Yet, these steps are not enough for creating effective institutions. The critical point is that institutions

require effective leadership, adequate resources and trained manpower. Even more critical is inter-institutional synergy.

India cannot escape the fact that new institutions are required to deal with new challenges. For instance, the challenge of cybersecurity requires a totally new approach, different from the traditional silo-based institutional functioning. New Delhi has not even started thinking seriously in terms of

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ensuring the security of assets in space and on ground, on which the country's development relies so heavily.

While India has created a lot of national security institutions, it does not as yet have a proper mechanism to synergise their activities. The government structures function in isolation. The coordination takes place mostly at the highest level, which is not the proper way because senior functionaries do not have the time to go into nitty-gritty of national security. It is for this reason that coastal security continues to suffer despite the 26/11 terrorist attack. The government has not been able to put in

place an overarching institution that could coordinate coastal security, in spite of the efforts of the NSC.

Even as the defence budget of China rises to nearly \$ 180 billion, the Indian defence budget is at around \$ 40 billion and constitutes only 1.49 per cent of GDP-- which is the lowest ever as a proportion of GDP. It is a moot point whether with such low spending India can ever hope to bridge the power asymmetry with China. This is also true in the area of innovation and R&D. China currently spends more money on innovation than on defence.

India needs to bear in mind that there is a close nexus between a desperate Pakistan and an assertive China. This can have unforeseen consequences for India. The two countries are likely to coordinate their military actions in case of a military conflict. Synergy between the three wings of the military is absolutely essential for dealing effectively with the threats posed by

the China-Pakistan alliance. What exists at present are three services, with separate doctrines, that have little connect with each other. This needs to change.

Defence Planning

It is not just a question of resources, but how they are allocated. Defence planning has been a weak point in defence management. In the absence of an overarching institution in the higher defence organisation, prioritising resources amongst the three services and coordination of their activities become difficult. That is where the CDS could play a role. The recommendation has been pending since 2001, when it was first made by the GOM. The government has recently set up a Defence Planning Committee (DPC) under the National Security Advisor to fill the gap. The DPC will consist of representatives of MOD, MEA, the armed forces and the Finance Ministry. How this institution would fare remains to be seen. The key to its success will be the powers it is given to enforce reforms. These have not yet been spelt out.

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An analysis of the recent defence budget reveals the continuing structural problems in resource allocation and spending. In the case of the Army, which accounts for nearly 50 per cent of the total defence budget, most of the resources are spent on revenue items. Relatively little is left for modernisation and capital expenditure. Whatever is allocated is spent on committed liabilities. Relatively little is for new acquisitions. The situation is a little better for the Air Force and the Navy. However, the major impediment for the armed forces has been the acquisition process, which has yet to be made efficient despite many efforts in this direction. It takes nearly 5 to 10 years for a defence contract to be signed and concluded after the floating of the request for information. During this timeframe, the technologies become obsolete. Due to the innumerable scandals in defence purchases, the bureaucracy has become extremely cautious and risk averse. The pernicious practice of opting for the

lowest tendered equipment, even that which is high-tech, has also resulted in substandard acquisitions.

Today India imports nearly 60 to 70 per cent of its defence requirements. At times of crisis, this dependence can be a vulnerability. The supply of spare parts and maintenance of imported equipment is costly. The alternative is indigenisation. Unfortunately, except for some systems, indigenisation efforts have been largely unsuccessful. The ecosystem required to bring technologies from lab to production is deeply flawed and innovation ecosystem in the country as a whole is weak. India's R&D expenditure, as a percentage of GDP, is among the lowest in the world for a country of its economic and military size and aspirations. The link between the government, academia and industry is inadequate. The start-up programme is a good beginning, but there is a high rate of failure in start-ups.

The government has recently released a draft defence production policy and put it up for public comments. A cursory glance at the draft policy reveals that the basic issue of how to involve the private sector in defence production has not been addressed. In its present form, the new draft defence production policy is not going to make much difference unless the fundamental issues such as: orders, sustainability of orders, providing a level playing field for the public and private sectors, boosting research and development, and addressing the skills shortages, are effectively dealt with.

Defence diplomacy is an important component of overall diplomacy. One of the sub committees of the DPC is supposed to look into this. However, adequate resources are needed for effective defence diplomacy. The recommendations made by an NCSC Task Force on how to improve India's defence diplomacy have not been implemented. As India begins to seriously embrace strategic partnerships and security cooperation defence diplomacy will play a much larger role in India's overall diplomacy.

Civil-Military Relations

Civil military relations in India are also in need of an overhaul. The previous Task Forces had suggested a genuine integration of the forces with the MOD for decision-making purposes. The bureaucracy, untrained in security analysis, is unable to appreciate the requirements of the military. While an

Integrated Defence Staff has been created, it works outside the structures of the MOD.

Procurement too has been the bane of India's defence modernisation. From time to time suggestions have been made for setting up a professional defence procurement agency, which can study the problem of slow procurement in a holistic manner. This will require a restructuring of the procurement wing of the MOD. Suggestions have been made to involve professionals in the process, as is the case in other countries. So far, this recommendation has not been accepted. The result is that the country is stuck with archaic procurement procedures, in which procedure takes precedence over national security.

The synergistic working of the forces is equally important. While some steps have been taken in this direction, as for instance in the setting up of a tri-services command at Andaman and Nicobar and a joint corps, genuine synergy has yet to emerge. In order to deal with the issues of cyberspace and space security, we need to encourage combined operations. Here, the initiative is to be taken by the military. A CDS, would be able to better facilitate synergy among the forces.

Training is an essential part of military preparedness in conditions of modernisation. As new technologies are introduced, training becomes even more important. Joint training commands are needed. There is also a need for well thought out tri-service doctrines for war fighting. In recent years the forces have come up with separate doctrines. While these are useful documents, it is the joint and synergistic working within the military that will win wars in the future.

Threat Assessment

An accurate assessment of national security threats is needed. It would be tragic if India's armed forces continue to procure platform and systems for wars that may never be fought. There has to be an adequate understanding of the changing nature of warfare. The Office of Net Assessment (ONA) in the MoD is too weak and inadequately staffed to undertake this task. Think tanks have to be co-opted to make long term assessments.

Cyber warfare is a case in point, for which India has to be adequately prepared. A national capability to fight cyber wars and to defend critical infrastructure, however, is yet to be built. There are no norms in cyberspace. It

is constantly expanding and fast becoming unmanageable. Both state and non-state actors are active in cyberspace. Many of India's new generation vulnerabilities are in the cyberspace. India needs to build defensive and offensive capabilities for fighting cyber wars. A beginning has been made, but much more needs to be done.

Information war is becoming an extremely important aspect of overall war-fighting and for maintaining law and order. Social media has emerged as a potent propaganda tool which can be used by state and non-state actors alike. Strategic communication is an equally important part of war fighting. The

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country does not have adequate institutions to deal with its strategic obligations. The efforts are episodic and centred on specific incidents. China on the other hand is constantly projecting its views across the world, especially in India's neighbourhood.

It is also vital to build up the strategic infrastructure in the border regions. Here there is much catching up to be done. Not only is the terrain difficult, but the existing institutions such as the Border Roads Organisation (BRO), also need to be strengthened.

Internal Security

The internal security scenario has undergone a sea change in recent decades. Terrorism, insurgencies, communalism, caste-related violence, left-wing activism, law and order problems and white-collar crimes are the common threats with which the law enforcement agencies have had to grapple. Societal tensions often escalate into violence. There has been needless loss of life in various agitations in the country over the last few years. Meanwhile, there are new emerging challenges, such as: radicalisation, cyber-crime, misuse of social media, political violence, narcotics and drugs, flash mobs, unrest on campuses, crimes against women, violence among social groups, agitations over jobs and reservations, misuse of crypto currencies, crimes in the dark web, vulnerability along the coasts, illegal fishing and so on. The security institutions are ill-prepared to deal with these diverse array of threats.

Police and paramilitary forces are essential for maintaining internal security. Both systems need major reforms so that the forces can be effective, and yet the reforms have been languishing for decades. The recommendations of the Dharmavira committee made in 1979 have still not been implemented. Since then, many more committees have recommended an overhaul of the police and criminal justice systems. The progress in implementation has been extremely slow. Meanwhile, the police have often been politicised. The conditions in which the policemen live are abysmal. Duty hours are long and there is no motivation for them to work professionally. The states are not spending enough money – less than one per cent of their budget – on police infrastructure and the police force. The public have a negative image of the police on the one hand, and fear of law enforcement agencies is dissipating. Angry mobs often clash with the forces causing casualties. We have seen this happening in the incidents of stone pelting in Jammu and Kashmir. Training is inadequate for dealing with the traditional and new challenges.

What is to be done is known to everyone. Yet, little is being done to reform the police system. The police modernisation budget was allocated to complement the low spending by the state governments, on their police forces. But even the police modernisation budget -- presently at about Rs 8 billion-- is barely sufficient to modernise the police forces in any meaningful manner.

Some of the central armed police forces – Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Border Security Force (BSF), Indo-Tibetan Border police (ITBP), Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), Assam Rifles, Central Industrial Police Force (CISF) – have undergone massive expansion in the last few years because of the multiple internal security challenges across the country. These forces are frequently requisitioned by states. They are also deployed for ensuring security during India's many and frequent elections. The regular use of these forces indicates that the state governments are unable to deal with the various security challenges. The total strength of the paramilitary forces today is touching a million. Nearly Rs. 600 billion are being spent on paramilitary forces. Their strength is likely to grow as internal security challenges multiply. Their combined budget has gone up by more than ten times in the last 15 years. The budget of the MHA has also gone up in the same proportion.

Border management and coastal security have emerged as major security issues in recent years. The BSF is responsible for managing the fence along the Indo-Pak and India- Bangladesh borders. So far the 'one border, one force' principle has been followed. However, this may change in the coming years. The infrastructure at the borders is of low quality, often worse than on the other side of the border. Many border areas are getting depopulated, as for instance in the Northeast. At the same time the border areas in West Bengal, Assam, Punjab, and Jammu region are highly populated. In some areas, the shelling from across the border repeatedly disrupts the life of border populations. The needs of the border populations have to be met urgently and expeditiously. The key aspect of border management is the welfare of the population on the borders, which is often neglected. In the absence of this critical effort, border management can only be a half exercise.

Left-wing extremism, and insurgency in parts of Jammu and Kashmir and Northeast India, have been dealt with by paramilitary forces. Many of the issues that give rise to conflicts are political in nature. It is essential that the government's control over the situation on the ground remains effective at all times. The forces must be well trained, motivated and equipped. The issues confronting the paramilitaries are similar to those that other forces grapple with -- inadequate resources, training, leadership, synergy, decision-making and delay in procurement. Such conditions must not be allowed to go on.

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Cybersecurity

In 2013 India formulated a cybersecurity policy and a cybersecurity assurance framework for the country. There is now an institutional structure for cybersecurity. It consists of the National Cyber Security Coordinator in the NSCS, Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), and the National Critical Infrastructure Protection Centre. The problem is that the institutions are as yet not strong enough. They are deficient in resources, technology and also lack coordination. Unlike other countries, such as the UK, the R&D expenditure on cybersecurity is inadequate. The government has provided a separate budget

for cybersecurity R&D to the NSCS. This is a major step forward. However, the capacity in the country to undertake cybersecurity R&D too is inadequate. Research has to be converted into products and technologies. The reality is well short of what is required. The cybersecurity industry currently imports a lot of hardware and software. Not enough testing facilities exist in the country to test the imported hardware and software. The components being used in critical networks are mostly of foreign origin. This constitutes a risk to national security.

India needs to pay greater attention to geospatial intelligence. In this field India's capabilities are limited. India's satellite programme is growing, but falls short of requirements. The synergy between satellite imagery and maps is inadequate. The base maps required for synergising the satellite images are also very limited. India needs to follow a liberal policy which would aid greater use of spatial information in day to day life.

National Security Council

There are four main ministries dealing with national security. They do not work together. The government set up a NSC in 1999. The post of National Security Advisor (NSA) was also created, along with a Secretariat (NSCS) and an Advisory Board (NSAB) comprising experts from outside the government. The NSA, NSCS, NSAB, and Special Protection Group are the key constituents of the NSC structure. While the NSA has become an indispensable part of the security system in the country, the other institutions are under-utilised. The NSC meets infrequently. The NSC structures are not integrated with the allocation and the transaction of business rules. As a result, these institutions are not empowered enough to carry out their mandate. The advisory nature of the NSC also makes it ineffective and its expertise is utilised inadequately. The NSC can help in making assessments of the threats and opportunities. It can promote coordination and synergy among the various national security institutions. It also can be a focal point for security diplomacy with other countries. Unfortunately, the NSC, barring the NSA, has not been utilised fully.

An institutional approach to national security management is essential if India is to adequately deal with its complex security challenges. Deep-seated reforms are required in existing national security institutions. It needs to

provide enough resources to the institutions and these need to work in synergy. Political will and effective institutional leadership is critical for bringing this about.