

# Civil Military Relations and National Security

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*Regardless of how superior the military view of a situation may be, the civilian view trumps it. In other words, civilians have a right to be wrong.*

— Peter D Feaver

## Introduction

Wikipedia describes Civil-Military Relations (CMR) as “the relationship between civil society as a whole and the military organization or organizations established to protect it.” CMR is, indeed, a very broad-based or sort of umbrella concept that incorporates diverse disciplines like politics, economics, management, social science, area studies and many more connected subjects. In essence, it defines the relationship between the civil political authority of a given society and its military establishment. However, in most ordered societies and democracies, the military works under civilian control and the only exceptions are military dictatorships, though the degrees of autonomy and integration/interfaces vary. The opening quote of Peter D Feaver has to be seen in the context that invariably it is the civilian hierarchy that is ultimately accountable to the public and the buck literally stops there.

Notwithstanding, the fact that India is a seven-decade-old established democracy, the structures are still evolving and globally accepted practices and norms like complete integration, Theatre Commands, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and even National Defence University (NDU) are still to be operationalised. This is despite India having fought five wars, including

Kargil, combating insurgencies and proxy wars and, above all, undertaking numerous studies and forming many committees. At the functional level, the armed forces retain the topmost rank in popularity and are perceived to be the very best, yet isolated aberrations like the military-police fracas at Bomdila and the general apathy amongst the bureaucracy, specially the police, need to be redressed.

## **Theoretical Models**

An analysis of important theoretical models is pertinent to draw appropriate lessons. This survey highlights many variants: Samuel Huntington's "Objective Civilian Control", Morris Janowitz's "Subjective Control" Rebecca Schiff's "Fusionism/Concordance" theory and Peter Feaver's "Assertive Control" models. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

**Objective Civilian Control:** This pioneering theory is outlined in Samuel Huntington's book, *The Soldier and State* and is also referred to as the "Institutional Theory". The basic construct of this theory seeks to limit the power and authority of the military to matters military. Concurrently, it also requires civilians to stay out of the military realm by voluntarily self-limiting themselves in their realm. It translates into an impermeable layer between the two domains, demarcating the division between the civilians and the military, thereby balancing liberal politics and military professionalism.

In the same basic genre but as a subtle variation is the theory propounded by Michael Desch, which prescribes the creation of the thin permeable layer between political structures and military instruments, wherein there is substantial military autonomy in the military, technical and operational spheres (how to fight wars) in return for complete subordination to civilian control of politics and connected grand strategy (when, and whether, to fight them). Despite a clear demarcation, the layer is thin and permeable, permitting substantial but only exceptional room for civilian intervention in what would normally be the military realm and vice versa. This construct also envisions a limited scope for the military to act politically. However, in keeping with dominant opinion across various theories, Desch also believes that there is good civilian control, when, in the event of divergence in civilian and military viewpoints, the civilian opinion is accepted.

**Subjective Civilian Control:** The other major theory also termed as "Convergence Theory" was outlined by Morris Janowitz in his book, *The Professional Soldier*. The "Subjective Control" is sought to be established by blurring

the distinctions between the military and civilian realms. While doing so, it does not seek to destroy their inherent separation. He stresses on the need for a military leadership that shares civilian values leading to civilian dominance as a consequence of shared values. In a similar vein, “Fusionism” and “Concordance” are models conceived to control the military by minimising the differences between the two domains and merging their visions and responsibilities. Rebecca Schiff, leading advocate of the concordance theory, opines that cooperation gained through dialogue, accommodation and shared values among the military, political elites and society will discourage the military from interfering in politics.

**CMR is complex and is about bargaining, monitoring and strategic calculations.**

Further down in the continuum is another variant, the “Assertive Civilian Control” theory. This model questions the virtues of military autonomy and military professionalism. It recommends application of institutional mechanisms and civilian interventions to aggressively maintain civilian dominance in the formulation, management and implementation of military policy. Peter Feaver, borrowed the management model of “Principal-Agent” framework to inject dynamism and extend civil-military interactions beyond the usual coup psychosis, while replacing it with a ‘working-shirking’ continuum that mirrors rich variations in the pattern of the civil-military interplay. Feaver views CMR, especially daily interactions, as an on-going game of strategic moves in which civilian principals vary the intrusiveness of their monitoring, and military agents vary their compliance with civilian preferences. Feaver contends that in practice, CMR is more complex than traditional theory and is often about bargaining, monitoring and strategic calculations over whether to work/comply or shirk/avoid. Determined military actors are likely to exploit the weaknesses of civilian principals at crucial points and will do so without launching a formal coup or precipitating a full blown crisis in the relationship. Civilian principals, on the other hand, can manipulate the cost-benefit calculations even of very reluctant military agents, and, thus, prevail if they are sufficiently determined. He, like Desch, further opines that sound and democratic CMR requires that civilian leaders are always obeyed even when they are wrong about what is needed for national security. Eliot Cohen—in an analytic study of war and politics, “Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen and Leadership in Wartime”, recommends a more intimate form of civilian control, with the political hierarchy engaging military commanders in detailed dialogues in which the political leaders coax, bully, interrogate or probe, rather than as a mere formal ratification of a course of action.

## **Emerging Dynamics: CMR in the USA**

As has been explained and implied in earlier discussion of theories, application of these models in real life is far messier and more complex. While India has no real need to ape the American model, yet, appropriate lessons have to be learnt as we are the two biggest democracies, with comparable armed forces. The US has experienced downsides like the sacking of Gen Douglas McArthur and more recently, Gen Stanley McChrystal, yet the military plays a pivotal role in shaping the national security policies. The system also had the maturity to rehabilitate McChrystal albeit in a different role and after a gap.

It will also be pertinent to recall the recent statement of Gen John Hyten, Commander of the US Strategic Command, which includes the nuclear forces, at the think-tank Halifax International Security Forum in Nova Scotia in November 2018. He had unequivocally stated that he would disobey any order that did not measure up to the US laws of armed conflict. He went on to list four basic principles: military necessity, distinction, proportionality and humanity. These closely correspond to basic criteria for use of force in India: necessity, minimum force, impartiality and good faith. It may be premature to infer that this statement makes a trend of an increasing sense of autonomy or defiance, yet it cannot be completely dismissed either.

While civilian control is non-negotiable, the emerging and abiding global trend is to factor in the military opinion by increased representation/interfaces, tolerating considerable dissent in policy formulation, and a concerted attempt by the civilian policy-makers to acquire better domain competence. In some cases, this quest for education is leading to the creation of a specialist cadre and internship with military establishments.

## **Existing Status of CMR in India**

An isolated 'bandicoot' statement by one of our Chiefs resulted in the establishment and media haranguing him. An objective analysis reveals that the General had only articulated the popular sentiments of the masses, which are routinely shown in movies. The Indian armed forces have defied the trend in the neighbourhood by steadfastly endorsing adherence to constitutional norms and the supremacy of civilian structures. They have also displayed a apolitical, secular ethos, with marked aversion to the very idea of coups. As per some strategic experts, Pakistan and India, two neighbours with a shared colonial legacy, are now at opposite ends of the CMR continuum: while the Pakistan Army revels in total autonomy, the Indian armed forces face increasing marginalisation and

even degradation. In CMR, India seems to be caught up in a situation which defies description and could at best be described as 'negative stasis'.

India has had a large number of committees like the Kargil Review Committee, sanctified by the Group of Ministers Report, the Naresh Chandra Task Force and more recently, the Shekatkar Committee. The roadmap for major reforms, which include globally accepted norms like integrated decision-making structures, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Theatre Commands, revamp of the acquisition and defence production eco-system and the National Defence University (NDU) continue to be on paper. The Transactions of Business Rules still spell out that the defence of India is the responsibility of the Defence Secretary and the National Security Adviser (NSA) does not even figure in these rules.

Due to our inability to resolve turf-centric issues, reforms like the CDS, Theatre Commands and NDU have been relegated to the backburner. As an alternative, an ad-hoc system with the Defence Planning Committee (DPC), led by the NSA, has been put in place, hopefully as an interim solution. The top-down approach is particularly relevant in turf-centric issues like integration and CDS, as exemplified by the 'Goldwater-Nichols Act' in the USA and other advanced countries. The DPC, headed by the NSA, includes the three Service Chiefs, Foreign, Defence and Expenditure Secretaries and Chief of Integrated Defence Staff (CISC). Its mandate is all encompassing and stipulates formulation of a draft national security strategy, capability development plan, defence diplomacy and defence manufacturing eco-system.

## **Way Forward**

Mr NN Vohra, former Governor of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and with the longest experience in security management, has called for an urgent need to revamp the entire security management structure and the promulgation of a new security policy. He has recommended the creation of a specialised cadre for security management. He has also recommended the setting up of a separate Security Affairs Ministry to ensure better convergence in the management of internal and external threats. In a different but connected context, Adm Arun Prakash has reiterated the requirement of creating a customised Defence Infrastructure Ministry. All these are relevant suggestions and have been articulated by doyens of the security establishment and require serious examination.

**Indian armed forces have always endorsed adherence to constitutional norms and supremacy of civilian structures**

Notwithstanding the fact that reforms at the apex level have been deferred, we need to identify those that require a gestation period and cannot be postponed. These include integration of decision-making structures, the NDU and revamping of the defence acquisition/production process. Identified reforms should be fast tracked and the endeavour made to implement others even if they have to be done without consensus and through a top-down diktat; after all, turf protection, couched in the projection of imaginary apprehensions, should not be allowed to derail the reforms.

### **Civil-Military Fracas**

The Bomdila incident of November 2, 2018, acquired sensitivity due to the proximity to the Chinese border and the fact that the troops involved belonged to the specialised category of Arunachal Scouts, based on the 'sons of the soil concept'. Such incidents, though rare, do occur occasionally in cantonment towns like Mhow, Devlali and Ahmednagar in the hinterland, especially where young officers are trained. Irresponsible lobbying by the police associations and social media added fuel to the fire. The incident doesn't even remotely reflect the standing of the Indian Army among the public, which remains high. Such incidents in sensitive areas are misused by inimical elements to create fault lines and distrust between the security forces and civilian population. Cooperation amongst all the elements is critical in such sensitive areas and for the success of specialised troops like the Scouts.

The incident was resolved by the prompt intervention by the higher hierarchy and mature handling at all levels. Notwithstanding, the resolution of the Bomdila incident, there is an urgent need to reiterate Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and better education. It is also imperative to control high-handedness at the functional level, in both the police and the civil administration. While impartial joint investigations must be conducted expeditiously and the guilty brought to book, introspection is required to lead to long-term institutional correctives.

### **Conclusion**

With ever changing socio-cultural and geopolitical and economic dynamics, there are corresponding changes in CMR and the subject remains in focus. India is yet to take a final call on policy, structure and interfaces despite facing external and internal challenges. It is hoped that the process will be dealt with promptness and a pragmatic approach to optimise CMR.

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