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Have a Word with the Soldiers*

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The recent controversy in the USA in which Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of the NATO forces in Afghanistan was compelled to submit his resignation to President Obama has provoked inevitable comparisons with President Truman's sacking of the iconic hero of the Pacific war – five-star General of the Army Douglas McArthur, commander of the UN forces in Korea, in 1951.

In both cases, the core issue related to the supremacy of civilian authority over the military, in the specific context of subordinating military strategy to fit within the broad objectives stated by the political leadership. Both MacArthur and McChrystal were theatre commanders tasked to fight America's overseas wars for freedom and democracy.

While McArthur was tasked to push the North Koreans and their Chinese "advisors" across the 38th parallel, McChrystal's orders were to lead multi-national forces in an endeavour to prevail over Taliban and stabilize Afghanistan within a finite (but unstated) timeframe. Both had their own ideas how to get the job done, and neither had the good sense not to go public with their dissent.

While there was a tremendous difference in the stature of the two Generals, the respective Presidents, six decades apart, were quite resolute that they had to be sacked. The distinguished but indiscreet warriors were, however, seen off with ample grace: the Commanders-in-Chief adding encomiums like “*one of our greatest commanders*” for McArthur, and “*one of our nation’s finest soldiers*” for McChrystal, in their parting speeches.

All this has transpired in the world’s oldest democracy where national security issues are the subject of open, enlightened and freewheeling debate in the houses of Congress. The US President receives advice on national security issues, at first hand, from the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, his current national security adviser is a retired General and, till recently, his Director of National Intelligence was a former Admiral.

What happens in the world’s largest democracy? Given their deep-rooted urge to emphasize the principle of civil control over the Armed Forces, one would expect Indian politicians to ensure that every military undertaking has a political rationale and underpinning. Oddly enough, our political establishment has flinched, not just from clearly defining national aims and objectives but also, from providing guidance regarding strategic aims and end-states to the country’s armed forces leadership. Every military operation since independence, from the 1947 Indo-Pakistan war to the 2002 general mobilization, has been guided more by political rhetoric than strategic direction.

White Papers and open debates on national security issues are unheard of in our Parliament. The sheer intensity of political activity in India makes great demands on a politician’s time. The serious and ambitious politician, views matters pertaining to national security or to strategic affairs as arcane, tedious and time-consuming; best left to the bureaucracy to handle.

He views armed forces personnel with a degree of detachment, as somewhat strange and peculiar creatures, and usually gives them a wide berth. With the best of intentions, the feeling has become mutual; and over the years, a yawning chasm has developed between the armed forces leadership and the country's political establishment. They are simply ill at ease with each other, and the civil servant serves to bridge the chasm.

Since independence, there have been two instances where Service chiefs have run seriously afoul of their political masters. In 1959 Gen. Thimayya submitted his resignation after a confrontation with Krishna Menon, but he was persuaded by Nehru to withdraw it the following day. Four decades later, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat had a serious difference of opinion with George Fernandes, and in an unprecedented move, that shook the armed forces, the NDA government deemed it fit to dismiss Bhagwat.

One wonders if the Raksha Mantri (RM) and the navy chief had been on more familiar terms with each other, and had sat down to discuss matters over a cup of tea, would this unsavoury episode not have had a less traumatic ending?

The McChrystal episode has fortuitously drawn our attention to civil-military relations in India at a critical juncture. In J&K, the situation is fraught with all sorts of dangers because the initiative has been allowed to slip into separatist hands, and the army is faced with a most unenviable situation in the face of mounting public hysteria. The steadily deteriorating internal security situation in the north-east and the Naxal-infested heart of India is steadily but surely drawing the reluctant armed forces into the dreaded maw of a domestic insurgency.

The Home Minister has expressed fears that the Naxals may be receiving training and support from ex-Servicemen (ESM). That may well be the case,

but the bureaucracy has certainly not helped matters by its insensitive handling of the simmering resentment amongst the ESM about their pension grievances. Allowing such discontent to ferment amongst the India's 3 million loyal and patriotic veterans, for over two years, is akin to needlessly inflicting grievous injury on the nation.

With our defence modernisation stalled, and the Sino-Pak axis on the ascendant, the external security situation appears equally bleak. The RM has recently echoed a forewarning about a two front military confrontation, for which the previous army chief was, as usual, berated by the media.

In a security environment such as this, one gets the uneasy feeling that communication between the politicians, bureaucrats and the armed forces leadership are not as "loud and clear" as they should be. In the recent Sukhna Land case, and the Dantewada CRPF ambush media discussion, the lay person got the distinct impression that the RM and army chief were communicating via newspaper headlines. There are many other issues like dilution of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, and contemplated deployment of the armed forces in anti-Naxal operations that require the political leadership to have a quiet word with the Soldier.

While the integration of the armed forces HQ with MoD may remain a distant dream, surely it is time for all national security stake-holders to sit and talk to each other.

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