

In-house expertiseⁱ

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Friday , Jan 29, 2010

When Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz's commented that war is a tool for achieving political aims, or "merely the continuation of policy by other means", he was not trying to define war. By placing state violence in a political context he was, actually, attempting to rationalise an otherwise irrational act. This throws up the question: to effectively plan and conduct war, must a senior military leader also have expertise in politics?

A predictable reaction would be one of horror, since we in India pride ourselves on a strong democratic tradition underpinned by our apolitical armed forces. But this issue has assumed salience in the light of intense and unfair media criticism directed, in recent times, at our military leadership for allegedly speaking out of turn. The military will happily face enemy fire, but is, unfortunately, rendered "hors de combat" before the Parliament, media and the public because of government and self-imposed restraint. But should the political leadership or security establishment not come to its rescue in such morale-sapping situations?

If the armed forces are to remain apolitical (and they must), the government has to provide them a layer of insulation, not just from the rough and tumble of politics, but also from the barbs of some sections of an ill-informed media. The best way to achieve this would be to do what the other democracies in the world have practiced for decades: subsume the armed forces headquarters within the central bastion of the government by making them an integral part of the Ministry of Defence. This is a huge breach in our national security edifice that the new NSA must redress at the earliest.

Reverting to the Clausewitzian tenet mentioned earlier, one assumes that it would be eagerly embraced, both, by Indian statesmen as well as our national security managers, because it clearly upholds and reinforces the principle of civil control over the armed

forces. And yet our politicians have historically balked at issuing guidance and directions to the country's military leadership for any operation since Independence.

The absence of a strategic culture in India has been under discussion for over a decade now, since the American analyst Tanham published a monograph on the subject. An emergent line of thinking attempts to make a virtue of this critical inadequacy in our culture, society and political leadership. This thought-process seeks to deride grand strategy or the quest for a coherent long-term vision per se on the grounds that unpredictable threats, changing priorities or compulsions of India's capricious politics would disrupt it, at some stage.

The diagnosis of strategic myopia at the top is substantiated by an account, which says that when the government ordered the unprecedented mobilisation of India's million strong army, post the Parliament attack, the army chief asked for specific directions. He was allegedly told at the highest quarters: "baad mein batayen ge" ("you will be told later"). A year later the forces were de-mobilised, with the nation no better off, and the chief no wiser! This seemed to consecrate Narasimha Rao's priceless comment that "not taking a decision is also a decision."

Our bureaucracy and diplomats are fond of blaming the Indian politician's limited horizon for their failure to evolve a long-term vision in any area. While the democratic process in our country does demand that a politician devotes sufficient time to micro-issues relating to party, Parliament and constituency, it is for this reason that huge bureaucracies exist to deal with issues such as intelligence, foreign affairs and security.

The post of NSA was created in 1999 to coordinate these inputs and to continuously brief the prime minister, while offering him policy options all along. However, such policy options would emerge only from an ongoing process of strategic analysis, net assessments, and contingency planning, which is underpinned by a long-term strategic vision of India's future. While the NSA lacks a planning staff, the organisations which specialise exclusively in such activities — the army, naval, air and integrated staffs — are rarely tasked with them, because of the politico-bureaucratic apartheid imposed on the armed forces.

Indians, as they look back at crucial junctures in recent history — Kashmir 1947, NEFA 1962, Tashkent 1966, Shimla 1972 and Pokhran 1974 — are now beginning to experience a nagging sense of disquiet about why and how we blundered at the grand-strategic level. The modus operandi of our adversaries provides further cause for unease.

The Chinese leadership is now within sight of two objectives which they obviously set for themselves at the end of the Civil War in 1949; firstly, to establish military and economic dominance in Asia, brooking no rivals; and secondly, acquiring nuclear weapons capability at the earliest. Having achieved both, the Chinese strategists have turned their gaze seawards.

Gwadar deep sea port in Pakistan and the Hambantota container terminal in south east Sri Lanka are just the early manifestations of an India-specific Chinese grand-strategy which encompasses the creation of a set of footholds in the Indian Ocean region to facilitate its implementation. If the planning and gestation period of these projects is 8-10 years, one can imagine how long ago this strategy was conceptualised.

In the case of Pakistan, its strategic brains-trust is the directorate-general of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). While this agency may evoke fear and revulsion in India, one has to acknowledge the vision and planning skills which have enabled it to produce an unending series of Machiavellian plots and plans to subvert, destabilise and balkanise India.

An operation of the kind launched by the ISI on 26/11 in Mumbai would have required planning, reconnaissance, intelligence-gathering, training and rehearsals over a period of 18 months to 2 years. We need to remember that this attack was only a sub-plot in the much larger grand-strategy of inflicting “a thousand cuts” on India which has been underway for the past decade, and must have been evolved by the ISI 20-25 years ago.

With adversaries like these, the new NSA must use all the cards dealt to him. Continued exclusion of the huge intellectual and planning resources of the armed forces out of the national security decision-making process would be akin to voluntarily donning a pair of blinkers — and refusing to take them off.

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ⁱ The article first appeared in Indian Express, 29 January 2010