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Critical Determinants of Civil-Military Fusion in India

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Civil-Military Fusion (CMF) is the optimisation of the use of civil and military resources to achieve national objectives.¹ It involves crafting strategies that promote collaboration between the civil and military domains to ensure seamless integration and operationalisation of talent and resources available in both sectors. CMF aims to enhance national security by leveraging the strengths of the military, civilian industry, scientific community, and academia in a synergistic manner. Sharing knowledge, expertise, and technology will facilitate the development of advanced capabilities and solutions to address threats of the present as well as the future.

The concept of CMF comes from China, where the terminology was used to describe comprehensive civil-military coordination to reinforce China's ambitions of becoming an economic, technological, and military superpower.² The Chinese military, known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is often viewed as the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party. This makes the PLA's relationship with the government vastly different from that of the Indian Armed Forces. There is a greater distance between the civil and military in India that needs to be reconciled in a manner suitable to the distinct political and economic realities of our country. This article discusses the critical determinants of harnessing the potential of CMF in the Indian context.

Improving Civil-Military Relations

Civil-Military Relations (CMR) is a complementary concept to CMF. Healthy CMR is essential for a successful CMF strategy, as it ensures communication between the political leaders of a country and its military officer class. Without strong CMR, efforts to implement CMF strategies may encounter resistance, inefficiencies, or misalignments with national policies and democratic values.

India's colonial legacy and the occurrence of military coups around the world after its independence created a high degree of suspicion towards the military. This led to exaggerated control over the military in the years following independence, which prevented effective engagement between the two parties.

Unlike the Western context, where most CMR studies are based, India faces unique challenges, such as the central role of bureaucracy. Since independence, the responsibility for military security has been largely abdicated by politicians, which has led to the politico-military relationship in the Indian context becoming a politico-bureaucratic-military relationship. A series of institutional reforms, including the creation of attached offices and definitions under the Allocation

of Business and Transaction of Business Rules, led to bureaucratic control rather than ministerial control over the military. The issue in the current arrangement lies in the fact that bureaucrats are generalists who specialise in procedure. They must remain enablers and executors of policy decisions because they do not have the expertise or accountability that justifies control over decision-making. The gap this has created between politicians and the military resulted in an 'absent dialogue',³ where the political and military leadership differed on critical national security goals. For example, between 2003–2007, the government was promoting peace with Pakistan, while the army was practising contrary doctrines like Cold Start.⁴

The establishment of the Department of Military Affairs was a tectonic shift in CMR in India. Loosening civilian control and forging a direct politico-military line of communication in the form of the Chief of Defence Staff has elevated the military's role in the Higher Defence Organisation. This was a vital step in strengthening CMR, and the effort must be sustained to establish an effective CMF.

Bridging Civil-Military Knowledge Gaps

Despite the closer civil-military interface, the enduring challenge in communication is the lack of civilian knowledge about military affairs. Political leaders need to be well-informed in order to match military capabilities with political goals. Such dialogues are most effective in countries with integrated defence ministries and adequate civilian expertise. However, India's generalist bureaucracy, which shuttles between departments, does not facilitate the development of sectoral expertise. Experts like Anit Mukherjee have argued that this form of civilian control had a pernicious impact on military effectiveness as civilians were not qualified to assist, challenge, and engage the military in a dialogue.⁵ There has also been a historic lack of civilian involvement in operational matters as a result of the experience of the 1960s and 1970s. Operational non-engagement is not optimal in the present landscape, especially for nuclear issues where the political leadership alone can authorise the use of nuclear weapons.⁶

The knowledge gap also exists on the military side. Another issue in CMR that hinders CMF is that military leaders often fall short of correctly appreciating political nuances.⁷ CMR, with the intention of preserving democracy, requires the military to remain apolitical. Samuel Huntington theorised a strict separation between the domains, stating that professionalism in the armed forces will prevent it from being involved in politics.⁸ However, this does not mean that the military must isolate itself from politics, especially in the context of Indian strategic culture where the army has

never threatened the civilian establishment. Officers must not play a part in politics while serving, but it is necessary for them to understand politics in order to be effective.

Correcting the imbalance on both sides would require both an overhaul of military education and the creation of a cadre of civilian defence experts,⁹ perhaps in the form of an Indian Military Service, to integrate both sides of the CMF equation.

Recognising the Role of Personalities

Apart from institutions, personalities play a significant role in determining the quality of CMR and CMF. Even in the absence of institutional frameworks, individual relationships, such as that between former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his Chief of Army Staff General Krishnaswamy Sundararajan, can significantly influence the outcomes of civil-military cooperation. The opposite could be said about personalities like former Minister of Defence V.K. Krishna Menon, who was incredibly powerful at the cost of the military voice. These personal dynamics can either foster or hinder a conducive environment for collaboration and mutual understanding, underscoring the importance of leadership in bridging the civil-military divide. Strong leadership with clear goals can be a key determinant of success for ambitious plans like CMF.

Collaboration between the Military and Industry

Apart from CMR, it is vital for CMF to collapse the walls between the military and industry. Modern warfare has seen a growth in the salience of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR), net-centric capabilities, artificial intelligence, drones, and other disruptive technologies.¹⁰ With grey zone warfare, the frontiers of war have also been evolving, and in avenues like cyber and space, it is not possible to distinguish between civilian and military spaces. Expertise in these frontier technologies also, if not predominantly, lies in civilian spheres. As 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies become the basis for future military capabilities, it is crucial that militaries exploit these technologies through CMF to remain militarily competitive with adversaries.¹¹

As the world's largest arms importer,¹² one of India's biggest vulnerabilities is its reliance on foreign countries for critical defence technology and equipment. CMF is more likely to be successful when countries are actively engaged in military modernisation.¹³ This push in India is a result of cognisance of its strategic circumstances. For instance, India is strategically diversifying to reduce reliance on Russian arms amidst tensions with Pakistan and China.¹⁴ Initiatives like *Atmanirbhar Bharat* in defence production are a push for a degree of self-reliance in which India's foreign dependence does not expose it to the potential risks of manipulation and disruptions due to

monopolistic supply.¹⁵ India has introduced numerous initiatives to propel the growth of private players and defence start-ups, but persistent challenges such as navigating procurement processes and securing funding will need to be resolved in order to unlock the potential of the private sector in fulfilling military requirements.¹⁶

Achieving such strategic autonomy also requires close collaboration between the military and industry. The recently established Army Design Bureau has been bridging the gap through several initiatives, such as the creation of Army Cells in Indian Institutes of Technology and conducting Forward Area Tours that familiarise the industry with unique environments in which military equipment needs to operate.¹⁷ Increasing transparency in military functioning is imperative to allow for the infusion of talent and innovation from academia, industries, technologists, and other domain experts.

Promoting Jointness and Integration

Although the concept of CMF focuses on the external outreach of the military, it is crucial to promote internal jointness and integration between the three services. The forthcoming theaterisation of the Indian Armed Forces will be a big step towards enhancing synergy. Theaterisation would streamline decision-making and optimise resource allocation, enabling agility in military policy and operations. Theaterisation underpins the strategic goals of CMF by fostering a cohesive structure with which civilian institutions can collaborate. Apart from broader questions, such as the form that Indian theaterisation must take, finer details, such as differences in rank structures, promotions, and culture, also need to be ironed out. Presently, competition and discord between the services have led to only issues that form the lowest common denominator getting presented to the government. There needs to be greater harmonisation to leverage the full spectrum of military capabilities and ensure that strategic decisions reflect comprehensive defence interests rather than sectional perspectives.

Creating Long-Term Strategic Planning and Vision

CMF calls for the complex process of integrating stakeholders with differing goals, cultures, and operating frameworks. Planning is vital to manage this complexity and enable collaboration across sectors. It ensures efficient resource allocation through the prioritisation of projects that align with strategic needs. In an era of rapid technological advancement, stakeholders need to be able to anticipate future capabilities to adapt or integrate advancements effectively. Further, the dual-use nature of frontier technologies demands responsible leveraging and clarity on ethical considerations.

A National Security Strategy that lays out a common set of guiding principles for cooperation would be invaluable in aligning the interests and targets of all the stakeholders involved in CMF. It would also be an opportunity to explicitly define our present and future security challenges, thus creating foresight for improved long-term strategic planning.

Conclusion

CMF is a long and challenging process that transcends mere technological advancement. It is about creating an integrated ecosystem that harnesses the collective capabilities, innovations, and resources of the entire nation towards achieving its security objectives. The success of CMF is mainly dependent on jointness and integration within the military, between the military and decision-makers (political leaders), and between the military and innovators (industry and academia). Facilitating this integration is contingent on a host of dynamic factors such as CMR, personalities, policy frameworks, institutional structures, and political will. However, most importantly, CMF requires a cultural shift towards greater trust, openness, and collaboration across all sectors involved. This shift is fundamental to breaking down the barriers that have divided defence and civilian spheres since British colonisation. Ultimately, the essence of CMF lies not just in pooling resources but in cultivating a cross-pollinating ecosystem of ideas, technology, and expertise between the civil and military domains.

Notes:

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² Audrey Fritz, "China's Evolving Conception of Civil-Military Collaboration," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/trustee-china-hand/chinas-evolving-conception-civil-military-collaboration>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

³ Anit Mukherjee, *The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India*, (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁴ Manoj Joshi and Sameer Patil, "Civil-military relations in Independent India," Observer Research Foundation, August 15, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/civil-military-relations-in-independent-india>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

⁵ Anit Mukherjee, "Towards control and effectiveness: The Ministry of Defence and civil-military relations in India," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6-7, 2022, pp. 820-842, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2022.2118115>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

⁶ Joshi and Patil, n. 4.

⁷ Prakash Menon, "India's civil-military fusion order of the day but not at the cost of military identity," *The Print*, December 27, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-civil-military-fusion-order-of-the-day-but-not-at-the-cost-of-military-identity/1283309/>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁹ Mukherjee, n. 5, pp. 820-842.

¹⁰ Sujan Chinoy, "Civil-military fusion for Atmanirbhar Bharat," Observer Research Foundation, December 31, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/civil-military-fusion-for-atmanirbhar-bharat>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

¹¹ Mercy Kuo, "Military-Civil Fusion: China, the US, and Beyond," *The Diplomat*, August 21, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/military-civil-fusion-china-the-us-and-beyond/>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

¹² "India remains world's largest arms importer, Russia its top supplier," *The Economic Times*, March 12, 2024, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/india-remains-worlds-top-arms-importer-sipri-report/articleshow/108399377.cms#:~:text=India%20continues%20to%20hold%20the,vulnerability%20in%20its%20defense%20procurement>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

¹³ Opcit Kuo, n. 11.

¹⁴ "Amid rising defense imports, India slashes procurement from Russia to less than half, a first since 1960s," *The Economic Times*, March 12, 2024, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/defence/amid-rising-defense-imports-india-halves-buying-from-russia-to-less-than-half-a-first-since-1960s/articleshow/108434211.cms>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

¹⁵ Chinoy, n. 10.

¹⁶ Rahul Bhatia, "Defense Start-ups and India's Quest for Self-Reliance," Carnegie India, September 05, 2023, <https://carnegieindia.org/2023/09/05/defense-start-ups-and-india-s-quest-for-self-reliance-pub-90474>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.

¹⁷ Kamal Shah, "Indian Army's Transformation Year Opens Doors For Domestic Defence Manufacturers," *India Aerospace and Defence Bulletin*, September 1, 2023, <https://www.iadb.in/2023/09/01/indian-armys-transformation-year-opens-doors-for-domestic-defence-manufacturers/>. Accessed on March 25, 2024.