The Human Element in Military Effectiveness: A Systems Approach

Suryakant Bal*

This paper examines the human issues in the entire system that could make the military more effective recognising the military as a sub-system within the larger system, which is created to address the aims of that very system. It asserts that there is no requirement to institute committees or make any more laws to address the human element issues relating to military effectiveness. The existing politico-legal system being adequate, there is no need for 'novel' or 'creative' solutions but only the will to effectively and ruthlessly apply them. It points out that military effectiveness is a tri-partite exercise in cooperation. Sound civil-military relations based on mutual respect and trust, an objective media that investigates both failures and successes of all, and a public that supports the military in its legitimate duty constitute the triad of military effectiveness.

"A soldier exists for purposes beyond his or her own."

- General John R Ryan

"You may not be interested in war but war is interested in you."

-Leon Trotsky

The effectiveness of a nation's military can be judged by the extent to which it can impose the national will on an adversary through military means to achieve political objectives – but only after the other means at the disposal of the state have failed. Military effectiveness is the creation and maintenance of the capability to wage and win wars to meet the aims of the government: other means for doing so are diplomacy, politics, economics, law and culture.

From a management perspective, a system is the sum-total of individual but interrelated parts

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***Air Commodore Suryakant Bal, AVSM (Retd.)** is a noted defence analyst. Currently, he teaches management in business schools in Pune.

(sub-systems) put together according to a specific scheme or plan, to achieve the pre-stated objectives. The military is, thus, an interrelated sub-system, created within the larger system of the external civilian environment to meet national objectives. Elements of the external environment encompass the geo-political, legal, economic, human, socio-cultural and technological aspects and have to be addressed during the conduct of military operations. The military today operates under increasingly severe constraints which do not always permit the unfettered application of military force even when necessitated by ground realities: non-military agencies are certain to be watching and evaluating – but the military has to meet its objectives nevertheless and is increasingly answerable not only to its masters, but to the public at large of which the media is a not insignificant sub-sub system.

However, as a distinct entity the military sub-system is separated from the external environment by the semi-permeable boundary military-civil interface, the effective management of which has a distinct bearing on military effectiveness. The external civilian eco-system includes the sub-systems or elements of government organs, the public, and the media. The military as a sub-system also comprises internal sub-sub-systems: namely the task, the structure, as well as the technological and human dimensions. The 'task' element flows from environmental demands and the 'technology', 'structure' and 'people' elements must be tailored to ensure achievement of the 'task'. Changes in the 'task' could necessitate changes in the other elements and unless all these elements are harmonised, military effectiveness cannot be assured. There is also a need to integrate the military sub-system with the external eco-system. Such a link would create the conditions necessary for the effective discharge of military duty as dictated by the environment.

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In a systems approach, military effectiveness is determined by relations with the political and government organs of the state, the public (which includes the media) and 'showing the flag' both in the external and internal environment. Internal aspects include weapon-systems and human resource management. In measuring military effectiveness it is understandable (and quite fashionable) to focus on the 'technology', the weapon-systems or *'hardware'* aspect: since these are visible and sometimes in the public domain.

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There is no denying the importance of this element: any serious imbalance in relation to current or potential adversaries could well make the outcome of a conflict a foregone and predictably adverse one.

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The reverse argument holds true as well: in a situation of near-parity in 'technology' with an adversary, the decisive factor in military effectiveness would be the 'people' dimension. In examining the important, if not overriding 'People' dimension, this paper will focus on the military's relations with government organs, the public, media and also introspect and examine the 'human' aspects of the military as affecting military effectiveness. The objective would simply be to identify anomalies and suggest approaches to remove or 'manage' them to enhance military effectiveness. The arguments advanced would be based on, and within the limitations of, information in the public domain.

Military operations invariably involve violence extending to the killing or maiming of humans. Stephen P Cohen argues that, "professional soldiers take human life and destroy property in the name of the state...the moral responsibility for their killing lies with the government, and that decisions concerning life and death are morally neutral if they are politically legitimate"[1] and so absolves a soldier of the moral responsibility or guilt or remorse. A soldier kills impersonally in the discharge of military duty. Any philosophy suggesting the achievement of military objectives through non-violent means or by the military is indeed fundamentally flawed. This does not sanction the indiscriminate taking of human life, but restricts it only to the minimum dictated by military necessity. This must be left to the judgment of the military and honoured, unless there is evidence to the contrary. Any superfluous violence, and its undesired (or unintended) impact, euphemistically referred to as 'collateral damage' must be recognised as an unpleasant aspect of military operations that can be minimised, though not always eliminated.

Violence in the land of ahimsa may appear at first sight to be a contradiction but a closer examination suggests otherwise. As summarised by "...Gandhi ordinarily supplied a hierarchy of recommendations...starting with what he considered ideally preferable, and ending up with what he considered better than nothing... Gandhi had no qualms about making a positive recommendation that violence should be used by a man who was capable of choosing only between violence and cowardice"[2].

Although Gandhi believed in nonviolence, his position was clearly enunciated in an article "The Doctrine of the Sword" (1920). If pacifism meant cowardice, then he was for violence[3]. In extra-ordinary situations that are not *'ideal'* such as during

counter-insurgency operations and when the military is called in, the choices get narrowed down to violence, inaction or cowardice, with a fait accompli for the military to exercise the former and suffer whatever the consequences may be. When the military has been called in after other agencies have failed to retrieve the situation that choice has already been made by its masters. In any 'after the event' analysis and with the benefit of hindsight, better alternatives could well emerge: in a fluid situation this luxury is not always available or feasible to the military.

In any vibrant democracy like India, the military is subordinate, though not subservient, to the government: the oath or affirmation of loyalty being to the office of the Rashtrapati and not to any individual. Though the terms 'subordinate' and 'subservient' appear synonymous they are not exactly so and differ in nuance: 'subordinate' implying being lower in the order of hierarchy whereas 'subservient' has the element of being slavish or obsequious. This is important for determining civil-military relations. It is noteworthy that officers of the German army, navy and the Luftwaffe swore an oath of personal loyalty to Adolf Hitler that was absolute and binding. The consequences were disastrous to both the officer corps and the German nation as a whole: Hitler, in the final act unilaterally abrogated any shred of loyalty or responsibility to both by seeking the easy way out by committing suicide.

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The evolution of military-civil relations in the present context started with the advent of British penetration into the sub-continent. The eventual subordination of the military to civilian authority came about after a turbulent process and a bitter tussle for supremacy. In 1683 Richard Keigwin, a Royal navy officer seized control of Mumbai opposing the East India Company on grounds of acting in the higher interests of the king[4]. In a surprising volte face in 1766 the "Company Bahadur" warned Robert Clive that although the military was subordinate to the civil service, it did not translate into civilian control over military operations[5]. The Pitts India Act of 1784 firmly established civilian control over the military by specifying that the head of the military was subordinate to the civilian government and could not succeed to the governor-generalship during a vacancy[6]. There were exceptions: Lord Cornwallis did hold a joint appointment and Field Marshal Wavell served as viceroy during World War II[7]. Notwithstanding these exceptions, the civilians held absolute control and military autonomy became

increasingly subject to civilian scrutiny. The last civil-military dispute during the British Raj was between Lord Curzon of Kedleston and his Commander-in-Chief Kitchener of Khartoum in 1904-05. Kitchener wanted absolute authority in military matters on grounds that only the military could produce the right answers. This view was not shared by Curzon who held a low opinion of the Indian army in particular and of military men in general.[8] As will be seen later, he was not alone in this.

Commenting on the Curzon-Kitchener dispute, Stephen P Cohen raises the following questions: should the civilians determine what is purely military and what is political, should a politician or a civil servant, with little or no military expertise pass judgement upon military problems, perhaps sacrificing military competence to political necessity?.[9] The observation of K Subrahmanyam in the *Hindustan Times* of February 16, 1969 is noteworthy: the tenure of civil servants in the ministry of defence is usually only five years, two of which are spent in learning the job[10]. A comparison of the 1962 and 1965 wars provide food for thought. Against the advice of General Thimayya to the effect that India could not take on China in an open conflict, Nehru gave instructions "to once more try and push out the enemy"[11]. In 1965 Shastri accepted the advice of his commanders and ordered the strike across the Punjab border[12]. The outcomes of both need no elaboration for the discerning reader.

In the case of the Indian national army the need for civilian control was believed to be necessary. As stated by Peter Ward Fay, "an army, if it is to be more than a band of freebooters or a collection of condottieri, must also have a government, in whose service and at whose direction it fights...this government will be the government of the nation". It is hardly surprising that Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose placed the INA under the *Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind*[13]. Mohammad Ali Jinnah too echoed a similar philosophy stating that the armed forces were the "servants of the people" and that "you must not make national policy, it is we, the civilians, who decide these issues and it is your duty to carry out those tasks with which you are entrusted"[14]. This sound philosophy apparently has never gone down well with the Pakistani military establishment which continues to harbour a (presently muted) the belief of being a *"state within a state".*

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Since independence though the civilian government has been in firm control of the military, civilian perception of the military covers a wide canvass indeed. For instance, some consider it as a waste of taxpayer's money, while others hold it in high esteem. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bose and Gandhi, in

their own ways, admired the military, notwithstanding Gandhi's visions of using the military to "plough the land, dig wells, clean latrines and do every other constructive work"[15]. Emphasis on non-military tasks in peace would therefore leave little time for the military to prepare for war. A practical manifestation of this philosophy was seen in Project Amar during the late 1950's when the army was tasked to construct accommodation for its own personnel to save costs. This was proudly shown to the visiting Chinese: who undoubtedly must have drawn appropriate conclusions about the army's preparedness for war. There have been attempts periodically to engage combatants in commercial farming, and even suggestions to use IAF transport aircraft for commercial purposes. This is nothing more than diverting the military from its primary task: namely - the fighting (and winning) of wars. Such a 'populist' and 'commercial' approach facilitates the creeping in of 'business' values into military culture where they have no relevance whatsoever.

Nehru considered the military to be barbaric and rejected it, remarking "the soldier, stiffening to attention…shoots and kills inoffensive and harmless persons who have done him no ill… the soldier…resents the advice of others, and, when he errs, he errs thoroughly…for him the chin is more important than the mind or brain"[16]. This perception could well have been formed by his experiences of the military during the freedom movement, but then it can be argued that he was favourably disposed towards the Allies during World War II in the struggle against fascism (which he abhorred). Though having no military experience Nehru's minister of defence VK Krishna Menon has been quoted as saying "it is wrong for the army to make policy; their business is to be concerned with military tactics… military planning must remain in the hands of the government…military matters are merely questions of expertise…strategy includes considerations that are related to our political orientation".[17] Thus, someone without military skills must make military planning decisions, while those with those very skills must not: but must bear final accountability. Rather simplistic (though possibly well-meant) views, that are certainly divorced from reality and do not suggest a 'systems-approach': the military being viewed as an element totally subservient to its masters as opposed to an interrelated sub-system of the larger system.

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Some post-Independence developments suggest emerging trends in this interrelationship. In 1948, the chief of the army staff was ranked with judges of the Supreme Court; and in 1963, he became junior to the cabinet secretary and to the secretary general of the External Affairs Ministry. The relative status of the military in relation to the police has also been downgraded: officers deputed to quasi-military organisations such as the Border Security Force could find themselves

under the command of police officers with lesser service, but holding higher ranks. These envisage a diminishing role of the military in military decision-making that does not auger well, and could seriously affect military effectiveness[18].

It is indeed an incredible argument that the military should have a diminishing role in decision-making in military matters or perhaps have no role at all. If the military is a sub-system within a larger system and is expected to act in concert with it, then joint decision-making in matters military with the civilian masters having the final say is indeed a valid argument. The validity increases when military objectives flow from geo-political aims. If each takes decisions in isolation, the outcomes could indeed be disastrous. The military must be involved in addressing geo-political questions both in war and peace in which it is expected, by the civil, to play a role: but must never be involved in politics. Fears of a military take-over in our context are indeed unfounded. While it is known that Lord Curzon raised the spectre of the "military bogey"[19], in the contemporary Indian context this is unthinkable to the point of being hilarious: if the Indian military has ever been a *"bogey"* then it has been so only to the adversary.

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The need to strengthen the military-civil relationship has been recognized in civilian government circles as well. A case in point is the establishment of the National Defence College (NDC). The objective is to expose officers of the rank of brigadier and equivalent to a wide range of political, economic, and strategic issues. Stephen P Cohen questions the effectiveness of this exposure[20]. In the author's perception, it is too late to foster 'jointmanship' with civilian counterparts for officers of the rank of Colonel, Brigadier and equivalent: they have very little residual service left for the exercise to have any real impact. In some cases the civilian counterparts were so junior in rank, service and experience that any meaningful interaction was almost impossible, notwithstanding genuine and laudable intentions.

The author's experience while attending the NDC as an air commodore was indeed enlightening. While the bonhomie was significant, so were the differing perceptions of the participants, many of which extended into the realms of fantasy: sometimes leading to an entirely misplaced, and false, feeling of 'superiority' based entirely on ignorance that bordered on arrogance. There were also cases of mutual and deep respect leading to genuine insights into one another's problems, life-long friendships that went a long way in dispelling myths and half-truths. If 'jointmanship' is to have substance and not just form, much more has to be

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done. There is a valid case for civilian and military officers attending courses in the establishments of both – not just at the level of the NDC or even the Defence Services Staff College. It could start at the level of the Junior Commanders Course itself. Unless officers from the military and civil organs of the state are exposed to each other's environment and problems, any real cooperation and collaboration would remain a distant dream. Deputation to one another's organisations is another possible solution.

The next aspect to be examined is the relationship between the military and the public. This is wide ranging indeed: from contempt and indifference to genuine respect. The reasons could be traced to both parties. Some sections of the public consider the military an unnecessary drain on the exchequer arguing that the money could have been put to better use. However, they offer no solutions for ensuring national security against an adversary.

This familiar "guns versus butter issue" attempts naïve comparisons of such as the cost of a tank or ship and how many schools could have been built in their place. The reality that we do have adversaries (both actual and potential) simply cannot be wished away. Therefore, the issue is *guns* and *butter,* and when guns are needed, the resources must (and can) be found. If a section of the public starves it is not on account of a shortage of 'butter' but rather due to a faulty distribution system outside the military domain. Public appreciation of the military is particularly evident while performing the secondary role of 'aid to civil power' during natural (and man-made) calamities. The dedication of the military and their near-exemplary discharge of duty has always been applauded by the public and particularly so in the rural areas which are a significant source of human resources for the military.

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Some sections of the media leave no stone unturned to project the military in a poor light and especially during counter-insurgency operations. This is understandable (though not valid) since during a conventional war the violence is not visible, and the press is free (and perhaps eager) to laud military victories. In sharp contrast

in counter-insurgency operations the violence is often directed against Indian citizens in the public domain for all to see, experience and publicise. Section 4 (xvii) of the Air Force Act 1950 clearly defines "enemy" and includes "all armed mutineers, armed rebels, armed rioters, pirates and any person in arms against whom it is the duty of any person subject to air force law to act". Similar provisions are in the Army and Navy Acts as well.

Military operations are increasingly portrayed as "fake encounters", making the military the personification of all that is evil and anti-national. The military is simply discharging its duty as directed by the state, and that too only after the state machinery has failed. While some of this reportage may be out of ignorance, the possibility of self-serving objectives cannot be entirely discounted.

Thus, citizens of India could, under some circumstances, constitute the enemy as in counter-insurgency operations. This aspect must be acknowledged since of late the military has been increasingly under the scanner and projected as an entity given to wanton brutality. The psychological demands on the military are indeed severe when called on to kill one's own brethren. That the military has discharged this duty honourably (with some exceptions) seems to have escaped the eagle eye of all, and especially the media. Military operations are increasingly portrayed as "fake encounters", making the military the personification of all that is evil and anti-national. The military is simply discharging its duty as directed by the state, and that too only after the state machinery has failed. While some of this reportage may be out of ignorance, the possibility of self-serving objectives cannot be entirely discounted.

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The role of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958 has been the subject of much debate. This Act is simply meant to facilitate military operations in extraordinary circumstances, and has provisions to prevent misuse. The endemic failure of the state demands deep introspection by it and not by the military. The military cannot discharge its state-entrusted responsibility without necessary authority: responsibility and accountability without necessary authority being a disastrous cocktail. The AFSPA is simply the legitimate authority given to it by the state to facilitate effective discharge of duty. There is of course a valid case to ensure that this

authority is not misused: accountability being vested with the military. The laws of the land are adequate to ensure this and make a strong case for civil intervention where necessary – but do not justify unwarranted interference in the discharge of military duty.

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Of late there is overwhelming evidence of the military being involved in scams with both non-state and state actors. While corruption is a part of human existence there is no justification for it in military affairs. When this affliction scales the organisational hierarchy it assumes dangerous proportions, bringing the military into disrepute not only among the public, but also down the military hierarchy and erodes effectiveness. Acknowledging the apolitical nature of the military in his book titled *The Indian Army,* Steven P Cohen finds it difficult to fix the ratio between "fighting" and "political" generals.[21] This remark is not misplaced: there has been a case of a senior military officer advising subordinates to vote for a particular political party. According to Cohen, the danger of the military dabbling in politics could be the result of a breakdown of professional standards resulting from the civilian abuse of the armed forces or internal corruption (mainly financial reward).[22] Fodder scams, "ketchup" colonels and brigadiers, kickbacks in arms deals and the recent Adarsh scam do not have a salutary impact on the military's image. The other two services would have their own skeletons in the cupboard. The public reposes great confidence in the military and such developments erode that confidence. The military must not only appear to be above board - it must actually be so. The focus of the author is on what the military must do: the civilian aspect being entirely the responsibility of its own organs.

Put bluntly, corruption is incompatible with the effective discharge of military duty and has to be ruthlessly purged whenever and, most important, wherever it occurs. Higher the place of corruption, greater is the element of betrayal and need for exemplary retribution. An external enemy openly and honourably bears arms and is worthy of respect. The invisible enemy within wears the external trappings of high rank while treacherously

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wrecking the system and abusing the privileges of high office and is worthy only of deep contempt. The price to pay for corruption must be exorbitant, as the rewards for honesty should be equally bountiful. However, it would be a grave mistake to tarnish all with the same brush. If the military continues to be effective as demonstrated in Kargil, it is because some officers refuse to be corrupt and despite those who choose to be so. The former are the real heroes: the very salt of the earth whose hands must be strengthened.

Since the military is for the nation and public, contact with society must be encouraged. However, the reverse flow of undesirable cultural elements must be kept out. This calls for unimpeachable leadership, establishment of core values and legal measures against the guilty.

Why has corruption wormed itself into the military as reported by the media? Was it always there and what is the trend? How can corruption be effectively managed if not eliminated? There are no specific answers or solutions: but some pointers emerge. The military sub-system has indeed failed in permitting, or perhaps tacitly facilitating, the rise of unsuitable individuals to positions where their hidden and dishonourable talents have found an outlet, they should have been identified and neutralised at the lowest possible ranks. A solution lies in evolving and sustaining an organisational climate and culture conducive to the effective discharge of military duty. With increasing contact with the society at large, some dysfunctional aspects of environmental culture have penetrated into the military and possibly been absorbed by it. Since the military is for the nation and public, contact with society must be encouraged. However, the reverse flow of undesirable cultural elements must be kept out. This calls for unimpeachable leadership, establishment of core values and legal measures against the guilty. Ideally people must not be corrupt out of deep conviction. In reality this is not always possible – in which case the opportunity to be corrupt must not be made available. This calls for sincere introspection among the military and the institution of appropriate measures to address this issue.

Humans though not infallible can be conditioned to resist temptation: the acid test is how the individual handles it. Military and civil laws are adequate to stamp out corruption: only the will to ruthlessly apply them must be present. The words of Horace Walpole are indeed significant "…no great country was ever saved by good men…good men will not go to the lengths necessary to save it…" The military does not require good men or women: only those passionately committed to super-ordinate goals above their own well-being, willing to go that extra mile at possible personal loss to save their country. This cancer can be managed (if not eliminated) in cooperation with the civil organs. There are certain to be honest counterparts in the civil establishment. If our nation has survived, it is because of

those magnificent and honest individuals in and out of uniform…and despite the rest. The military is not a job, vocation or a profession but a commitment to the nation requiring men and women of extraordinary calibre. Such individuals exist: they only have to be found and nurtured. It is unrealistic to assume that all humans have altruistic motives: but equally unrealistic to assume that humans are utterly devoid of any altruism either.

This paper has attempted to highlight the "people" or human issues in the entire system that could make the military more effective: recognising the military as a sub-system within the larger system, and created to address the aims of that very system. It is asserted that there is no requirement to institute committees or make any more laws to address the issues highlighted. The existing politico-legal system being adequate, there is no need for 'novel' or 'creative' solutions but only the will to effectively and ruthlessly apply them. The military is the sword and shield of the Nation and exists for it: unlike during the Raj when it was an instrument to ensure that the sun never set on the empire. Citizens must have the confidence that the military exists for them and they can freely live their lives, preserve their culture and engage in legitimate pursuits without fear. This is possible not only in the visible form of periodic military pomp and pageantry, but in substance through demonstrated exemplary conduct. Military effectiveness is a tri-partite exercise in cooperation. Sound civil-military relations based on mutual respect and trust, an objective media that investigates both failures and successes of all, and a public that supports the military in its legitimate duty constitute the triad of military effectiveness. Obstacles and impediments must be surmounted with determination in the spirit of civil-military cooperation and full support of the public. Unless timely, and sometimes unpopular corrective measures are taken by the system and its constituent sub-systems, the long sword would be blunted and the shining shield corroded exposing our nation and all that it represents to predatory forces. *idsa*

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1. Cohen, Stephen P., *The Pakistan Army,* Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 119-120.

2. Fay, Peter Ward, *The Forgotten Army,* Calcutta: Rupa and Co, 1994, p. 125.

3. Cohen, Stephen P., *The Indian Army,* Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 102-103; and, also see Gandhi, MK, *My Non-Violence,* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1960, p. 3.

4. Cohen, Stephen P., see note. 3, p. 5

5. Ibid, p. 12.

6. Ibid, p. 15.

7. Ibid, pp. 15-30.

8. Ibid. p. 26

9. Ibid, p. 29.

10. Ibid, p. 173.

11. Guha, Ramachandra, *India After Gandhi*, Pan Macmillan Ltd, 2008, p. 332.

12. *Ibid,* pp. 330-400.

13. Fay, Peter Ward, *The Forgotten Army,* Rupa & Co, Calcutta, 1994, pp. 206-207.

14. Cohen, Stephen P., see note. 1, p. 118.

15. Cohen, Stephen P., see note. 3, p. 92, 103.

16. Ibid. p. 105; And, also see Nehru, Jawaharlal, *Autography towards Freedom,* Boston: Beacon Paperback, 1958, pp. 3-4, 284.

17. Ibid, pp. 175-176, quoted in Michael Brecher, *India and World Politics,* London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 260.

18. Ibid, pp. 171-173.

19. Ibid, p. 26.

20. Ibid., p. 177.

21. Cohen, Stephen P., see note. 3, p. 176-177.

22. Ibid, p. 216, 218.