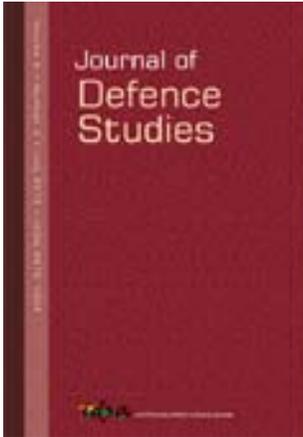


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Parliament and Defence Preparedness

*Deepak Kapoor**

The leakage of the former Army Chief General V.K. Singh's secret letter of 12 March 2012 to the Prime Minister, on large scale deficiencies in the Army, created an uproar in Parliament. While the issue of who leaked the letter and the motive behind the leak is under investigation by intelligence agencies, the bigger aspect that needs to be examined is how did we reach this level of hollowness, and what needs to be done to rectify the situation and avoid a recurrence in the future. In this context, among others, the Parliament of the country has a definite responsibility to discharge its duties in ensuring the readiness of the armed forces at all times.

But before going further, let it be clarified that it is the duty of a service chief to keep the government apprized of the readiness levels of his force and, consequently, the deficiencies existing from time to time. All chiefs have done it in the past and General Singh's letter was in continuation of that practice. It is a different issue that it came in the public domain which has led to this introspection, something which should have been happening in normal course.

The Standing Committee of the Parliament on Defence is constituted immediately upon election of the new Parliament and has members from all major parties in the Parliament and is drawn from both houses. It is for this august body to oversee the functioning of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and make its recommendations to the Parliament. It is expected to suggest structural, systemic and conceptual changes besides monitoring defence expenditure, so as to improve the operational readiness of the

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armed forces. This presupposes possession of adequate knowledge and expertise by its members to perform this role. Unfortunately, more often than not, with a few exceptions our Parliamentarians since independence have had limited knowledge of defence matters. In the past, we have not even had a major debate in the Parliament on defence, thanks to it being considered a holy cow. It was indeed a refreshing change that a debate did take place in the recent session of the Parliament which ended on 22 May 2012.

Discussion on defence matters suffers from an inherent disadvantage. Defence is a relatively dry subject as compared to, say, development. While tangible benefits of development, for which a Member of Parliament (MP) speaks in Parliament, are visible to his electorate in the form of infrastructural improvement, welfare schemes, greater employment, poverty alleviation, etc., there are no such quantifiable results or individual tangible gains when defence is discussed. It only gets attention when national fervour is heightened in the wake of a crisis or calamity, as happened during Kargil war. Or, it gets attention when corruption is detected in defence deals! Moreover, since the knowledge level in case of development is much higher, it makes for more lively and interesting debate, especially because public understanding of development is also greater compared with defence matters.

To rectify the situation, it may be worthwhile starting a short national security and defence capsule for members of the Standing Committee on Defence, and other interested MPs, to begin with. This capsule could be conducted at the National Defence College immediately upon selection to the Standing Committee. Additionally, the Committee members should visit units and defence installations of the services at least once a quarter, individually or as a group, to familiarize themselves with ground realities. Only then can meaningful and practical solutions to defence-related issues be discussed and debated. It is not enough for them to call MoD officials and representatives from the three services to the parliamentary annexe for discussion before finalizing their recommendations to the Parliament.

The Standing Committee is literally the 'eyes and ears' of the Parliament on defence matters and has a sacred role to perform. In the limited time available, it needs to concentrate on conceptual issues and systemic improvements rather than day-to-day activities and crises. Some of the major issues that could make a difference in operational efficiency and readiness of the services are discussed below.

DEFENCE FUNDING

Expenditure on defence is perceived to be non-productive and has to be incurred at the expense of other important requirements. Thus, there is always a dilemma as to how much is enough for defence annually—the classical ‘guns versus butter’ debate. If India is a rising power and needs to be looked upon as a regional player, leave alone a global player, it must have the requisite capabilities so that challenges to its growth and stability are avoided. Additionally, as a growing power, it should be able to go to the assistance of other neighbouring countries, whenever requested. To possess these capabilities, a portion of the national resources has to be earmarked for defence on an ongoing basis. At a conservative estimate, approximately 3 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) needs to be earmarked for defence. However, in India, the average defence expenditure for the last two decades has been between 2–2.25 per cent of the GDP. Such shortfalls over prolonged periods can never be made up overnight, resulting in an ill-equipped force. This is one area where Parliament can step in to ensure enhanced allocation for defence in future.

Parliament could monitor expenditure of the allocated defence budget to ensure it is evenly spread over the entire financial year, rather than being hurriedly exhausted in the last quarter for fear of lapsing. A glance at the defence expenditure on modernization in the first two quarters of a financial year over the last 10 years would show that it is generally below 10 per cent of the yearly allocation, with the balance 90 per cent or more being spent in the remaining two quarters in order to exhaust the allocated amount, leading, at times, to injudicious spending. In this context, it would be worth examining if for capital expenditure we could follow the system of roll-on plans rather than annual budgets.

ROLE OF PUBLIC SECTOR UNDERTAKINGS (PSUs) AND DIRECTOR GENERAL ORDNANCE FACTORIES (DGOF)

Since independence, the bulk of indigenous equipment supplied to the defence forces comes from the PSUs and DGOF. The monopoly enjoyed by these organizations has resulted in two major disadvantages. Firstly, because of monopolistic conditions, there are massive time and cost overruns impacting the operational preparedness of the services. Secondly, despite their inability to meet their production targets and make up deficiencies existing within the services, they have resisted any attempts to bring the private sector into defence production fearing an

end of their monopoly. The Standing Committee of Parliament would do well to visit these organizations and monitor their functioning to ensure that they stick to laid down time frames and costs, and do not put the nation's security in jeopardy by defaults. Non-productive PSUs could be closed down and their manpower gainfully employed elsewhere.

ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

India has a huge industrial base with the private sector playing a dominant role in a large number of areas. However, it is unfortunate that the private sector was not encouraged to enter the defence sector during the first 50 years after independence and be a partner in producing defence equipment for the nation. As a result, even today we are heavily dependent on imports to meet our operational requirements. In the process, firstly, we end up paying through our nose for these imports. Secondly, the possibility that, in a crisis situation, these imports may not be forthcoming due to political considerations cannot be ruled out. The nation's security cannot be hostage to dependence on imports from others, especially at crucial times. We need to develop our own defence production capability and achieve a level of self-sufficiency. Had the private sector been brought in earlier, not only would it have broken the monopolistic hold of the PSUs with its concomitant effects, but it would have also met the country's requirements besides becoming an exporter of defence equipment. Today, even Pakistan is a bigger exporter of defence equipment than India.

Lately, some tentative steps have been taken to bring in the private sector. However, these are not enough and this is where Parliament can step in to hasten the process. After all, defence modernization is an ongoing process and in this field the rates of obsolescence are very high. In the next 10 years, we are likely to spend large sums of money on modernization. It is up to us to ensure that this money is not doled out to foreign arms manufacturers but is spent within the country.

INTEGRATION OF MoD AND SERVICE HEADQUARTERS (HQ)

The Arun Singh Committee had recommended closer integration of the MoD with Service HQ for better coordinated functioning. Unfortunately, while it has been sought to be achieved on paper—by changing designation of the service HQs—practically nothing has changed in actual functioning with both working in their separate compartments. Thus, when things

start going wrong, each blames the other indirectly. For example, in case of delays in new acquisitions, the MoD invariably blames the Service HQ for faulty Requests for Proposals (RFPs), excessive time for trials, etc., and Service HQ blames the MoD for bureaucratic delays, inadequate knowledge, funds constraints and general indifference. Ultimately, it is the operational preparedness which suffers. It is time the Service HQ are fully integrated with the MoD with cross-postings of officers from civil and military sides to both. Here again, the Parliament could play a constructive role in ensuring integration between the two at the earliest. There would invariably be resistance from entrenched interests, but at times things have to be forced through in the national interest. Both in the US and UK, integration within the services was achieved through parliamentary acts in the face of tremendous resistance.

REVAMP OF DEFENCE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION

The Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) was created with the aim of developing in-house technologies for manufacturing defence equipment indigenously and, thus, reduce dependence on imports besides concentrating on those high-tech areas where other countries were reluctant to share their expertise. Additionally, it was expected to coordinate defence research in the country, both in the government and private sector, so that duplication of effort is avoided. Unfortunately, it has not been able to deliver on both these counts. There have been massive time and cost overruns in most cases and, at the end of it, the finished product has not come up to the expectations of the end-user. The classic example here is the Arjun tank for the Army. Even for basic items like a successor to the 7.62 mm rifle or a carbine, we are constrained to look outside the country for imports. The available research effort has been frittered away in some of the DRDO establishments on non-military and non-essential products. Our Parliament will do well to look into the revamping of DRDO and making it a result-oriented organization with specific objectives. Private sector research must also be encouraged to target defence equipment and products. The DRDO should lay down the guidelines for this.

DEFENCE PRODUCTION AND QUALITY CONTROL

It is a well laid out principle that in order to ensure high quality of production, the quality control agency should be separate and

independent. In fact, it should be more closely aligned with the consumer than the producer so that the satisfaction level at the consumer-end is higher. However, in our case, the production agencies, i.e., the PSUs and Ordnance Factories and the quality control agency, i.e., the Directorate General of Quality Assurance (DGQA), both are under the Department of Defence Production. In such an arrangement, the possibility of occurrence of accidents is higher.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

It does not serve any purpose if the Standing Committee keeps repeating its recommendations year after year and there is no accountability in ensuring their implementation. Once the Parliament approves the Committee's recommendations, accountability of the government departments to implement these should be specified. On monitoring, wherever it is found that things have not moved forward, individuals responsible should be taken to task.

CONCLUSION

The Constitution of India has laid down a clear-cut role for the Parliament in overseeing the defence preparedness of the country. It is mandated to ensure that every rupee of the tax payer's money is well spent and accounted for. Its Standing Committee for Defence is charged with the responsibility of looking at the functioning of MoD in detail and reporting back to Parliament. It has to concentrate on macro-level improvements rather than getting bogged down with micro-level changes. Some of the major areas the committee could look into have been suggested above, but the list is by no means exhaustive. If the Parliament can apply itself to these areas and ensure improvements, it would have meaningfully contributed towards optimum utilization of available resources while ensuring national security and operational preparedness.