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Revamping India's National Security Structure: Agenda for the Indian Government

Arun Vishwanathan

Executive Summary

- There is an urgent need to revamp India's national security structure. In the past, there have been piecemeal attempts at ridding the ills plaguing the national security structure including the higher defence organisation. Given the 'systemic' nature of the problems, a holistic revamp is in order as opposed to piecemeal reforms.

- **Need for a National Strategy**: A national strategy is important for planning India's economic trajectory, shaping the country's foreign relations, planning its defence modernisation, improving its science and technology capabilities, resource planning, internal security and other such critical areas. Such a strategy would chalk out Indian priorities as a function of India's aspirations, security challenges and available resources.

- **Strategic Think-Tank and Coordinating Mechanism**: The National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) could be tasked with drawing up holistic medium to long-term strategies in various areas. The NSCS could also act as a coordinating mechanism which implements these strategies by bringing together various departments and ministries of the government.

- **Strengthen the NSA's Support Structure**: The National Security Advisor (NSA) is the fulcrum around which the NSC system operates. The NSA's role has expanded over time. Thus it is important to expand the NSA's core support structure. Also, for the NSA and the NSC system to be able to function effectively it must be able to draw upon and assimilate knowledge from multiple sources into a cogent national strategy.

- **Reforming the Higher Defence Organisation**: A decision on the position of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) is long overdue. The Chief of Defence Staff – regardless of what we choose to call the office – will foster inter-Service coordination in planning, execution of operations and in the force planning process. The system will ensure faster decision making during crises and provide a platform for inter-Service dispute resolution. Implementation of the system must address the drawbacks of the current system and evolve a purely 'Indian' solution keeping in mind the Indian situation and requirements.

- **Where to Begin?** The 2001 GoM Report on "Reforming the National Security System in pursuance of Kargil Review Committee Report" had recommended a comprehensive review of India's national security mechanisms every five years. The exercise of revamping the existing National Security structure could be initiated with such a review.
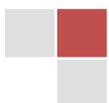
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Revamping India's National Security Structure: Agenda for the Indian Government

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The 2014 elections for the Sixteenth Lok Sabha saw the Indian electorate delivering a positive, decisive mandate to a single party after a gap of almost three decades. An important area which is in need for urgent attention from the Narendra Modi-government is India's national security structure. Despite past efforts at reform, India's national security structure continues to be plagued by absence of coordination, turf battles and paucity of human resources. Many of these problems are symptomatic of systemic ills which therefore require a holistic relook.

In order for India to achieve its national interests it should be able to work in a coordinated fashion. This necessitates a holistic revamping of the existing national security apparatus and its workings. Putting in place a mechanism that develops long-term strategies and coordinates their execution is imperative as is and strengthening the National Security Advisor's (NSA's) support structure. In addition, such a revamp should also include reforms to the existing higher defence organisation and intelligence setup. This brief will flag some of the important issues the incoming government needs to focus on in order to strengthen India's national security architecture.

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Need for a National Strategy

A national strategy is imperative for a country to plan its future course and chalk out its priorities as a function of its aspirations, security challenges and available resources. Such a strategy is important for planning its economic trajectory, shaping the country's foreign relations, planning its defence modernisation, improving its science and technology capabilities, resource planning, internal security and other such critical areas. Across the globe, countries - small and large - regularly release Defence White Papers or National Security Strategies.[2]

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India suffers the ignominy of being the only country of its size and importance which has never put out such a national strategy. The only time when India reportedly worked on shaping such an overall strategy was during the earlier BJP-led National Democratic Alliance regime when the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) reportedly authored such a document. However, it is not clear what actually came of this exercise.

A national strategy for India should begin with outlining the existing situation in India's neighbourhood and the world. It would then seek to lay out the main challenges faced by India. In light of these challenges and national capabilities, such a strategy would flesh out Indian priorities and possible Indian response(s) to seek a desirable end-objective that benefits Indian national interest.

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[2] "List of Defense White Papers and National Security Strategies released by various countries", *ISN-ETH Zurich*, 2012, available at http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Series/Detail/?lng=en&id=154839
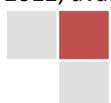
A Strategic Think-Tank and Coordinating Mechanism

Governments across the world by definition, spend most of their energies on day to day running of the country. Hence, there is a crying need for a 'think-tank' within the government which takes a holistic long-term view of strategies in various areas ranging from economic, security, foreign and military policies, national Science and Technology (S&T) priorities, management of human resources etc. There is a need for a coordinating mechanism which implements these strategies across the various departments and ministries of the government. Such a body should necessarily be at the apex of the government structure to provide inputs which will influence national decision-making.

The good news is that the Indian government does not need to create a new institution to shoulder the responsibility of shaping national strategies and coordinate among various government departments. The National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) which services the National Security Council and the National Security Advisor and is part of the Prime Minister's Office already carries out this task in some fashion. The NSCS would probably be best suited to discharge this responsibility. However, for the NSCS to be effective in coordinating between different government departments, the political leadership has to provide it with a clear mandate, human resources and adequate powers so as to be able to bring together all relevant stakeholders and implement strategies in a well-coordinated manner.

There is a crying need for a 'think-tank' and a coordinating mechanism at the apex of the

To this end, the NSCS should draw upon the expertise available in think-tanks and other research/ academic institutions. Additionally, it should be able to recruit talent from wherever it is available. To this end, the NSCS should actively pursue lateral entry of personnel into the organisation from the academia, research institutions and other government departments.

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Strengthen the NSA's Support Structure

The National Security Advisor (NSA) is the fulcrum around which the NSC system operates. The NSA's role in the national security setup has expanded over time. The NSA's role in the national security setup has expanded over time. Currently, the NSA wears several important hats. Apart from being the PM's Advisor on important security and diplomatic issues, he has also become an important coordinator of intelligence. The latter role has emerged out of the fact that he is the bridge between the intelligence chiefs and the Prime Minster. In addition, he heads the National Intelligence Board (NIB), the Technical Coordination Group (TCG) and the Intelligence Coordination Group (ICG).[3] Furthermore, the NSA is also the Special Representative on Border Talks with China and the Chairman of the Executive Council of the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA).

> *The National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) can shoulder the responsibility of shaping national strategies and coordinate among various government departments.*

Each of these positions are important responsibilities in their own right. There is definitely a degree of overlap between the various *avatars* of the NSA. However, some thought has to be given as to how to ensure that each of these responsibilities receive in-depth attention while ensuring that any division of these responsibilities does not lead to an absence of a coordinated, integrated strategy at the apex of the national security system.

One way to ensure this could be by expanding the NSA's core support structure. Also, in order to ensure that the NSA and NSC system is able to function most effectively, it must be able to draw upon knowledge from

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[3] *A Case for Intelligence Reforms in India: IDSA Task Force Report*, New Delhi, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 2012, pp. 89-90, available at http://www.idsa.in/system/files/book_IntellegenceReform.pdf
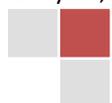
multiple sources. Thus, one of the major challenges of the NSA would be to be able to cogently assimilate knowledge. An expanded and well coordinated team would help in gathering these disparate pieces of information to formulate a cogent national strategy.

Reforms in India's Higher Defence Organisation

The organisation of higher defence in India has been a matter of debate since independence when the Indian government asked Lord Mountbatten and his Chief of Staff, Lord Ismay to recommend a system of higher defence management.[4]

One of the most contentious issues - which has brought out the differences between civilian bureaucracy and the Services and the inter-Service rivalry into the open - has been the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The Chief of Defence Staff as fleshed out in the 2001 Group of Ministers (GoM) report was to be a four-star officer from one of the three services in rotation. The CDS was to function as the permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The CDS was envisioned to provide a single point military advice to the government. He was to administer the Strategic Forces, bring greater efficiency into the planning process by intra and inter-Service prioritisation and bring 'jointness' to the Armed Forces.[5]

> *The government needs to be able to draw upon knowledge from multiple sources, assimilate knowledge and formulate a cogent national strategy.*

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[4] Arun Prakash, "India's Higher Defence Organisation: Implications for National Security and Jointness", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 2007, pg. 19, available at http://idsa.in/jds/1_1_2007_IndiasHigherDefenceOrganization_aprakash.

[5] "Group of Ministers (GoM) Report on Reforming the National Security System in pursuance of Kargil Review Committee Report", *Government of India*, 2001, pg 100-103, available at http://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf
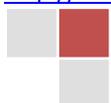
One of the major positives of a CDS - regardless of what we choose to call the office - will be to foster inter-Service coordination in planning, execution of operations as well as to the force planning process. In addition, the system will ensure faster decision making during crises and provide a platform for inter-Service dispute resolution.

The debate about the CDS has been reignited with reports indicating that the Naresh Chandra Committee has recommended the appointment of a four-star officer as full-time Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJSOC) by rotation with two-year tenures.[6] This is definitely an improvement on the existing situation where the CJOSC have short tenures and is held in addition to Chiefs' position as the head of his Service. As the report of the Naresh Chandra committee has not been made public, it would be pre-emptive to judge the move as a success or a failure.

> *Given the imperative for faster response during crises, greater 'jointness' between the Services and integrated force planning a CDS - regardless of what we choose to call the office - is the need of the hour.*

However, while implementing the recommendation, the government should try to address the drawbacks of the current system. As Arun Prakash notes, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) rarely discusses any matter with inter-Service implications.[7] Given the imperative for faster response during crises, greater 'jointness' between the Services and integrated force planning, a CDS - regardless of what we choose to call the office - is the need of the hour. Any move by the Modi-government to revamp the higher defence organisation

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[6]   Praveen Swami, "PM briefed on nuclear command chain", *The Hindu*, June 4, 2014, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/pm-briefed-on-nuclear-command-chain/article6080249.ece

[7] Arun Prakash, "India's Higher Defence Organisation: Implications for National Security and Jointness", *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 2007, pg. 27, available at http://idsa.in/jds/1_1_2007_IndiasHigherDefenceOrganization_aprakash.
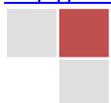
should take into account the drawbacks of the existing system, the differing opinions and evolve a purely 'Indian' solution keeping in mind the Indian situation and requirements.

In Conclusion

The Indian national security architecture needs urgent overhaul if the government seeks to tackle the myriad security challenges faced by the country. It is imperative that national strategies on internal security, economic and foreign policy, defence modernisation and resource planning be drawn up based on national capabilities, needs and the challenges faced.

Many of India's problems emanate from poor implementation of policies in a coordinated fashion rather than lack of financial, technological or human resources. A national think-tank and coordinating mechanism at the apex of the decision-making structure could go a long way in overcoming this drawback. Turf battles and lack of coordination are widespread among intelligence agencies and in the Services. All this has resulted in the government responding to crises rather than seizing the initiative.

A comprehensive review of India's national security mechanisms as recommended by the 2001 GoM report would be one starting point.

In the past, there have been piecemeal attempts at ridding the ills plaguing the national security structure including the higher defence organisation. However, the problems are symptomatic of systemic ills which therefore require a holistic revamp rather than piecemeal reforms.

A beginning could be made from taking cognisance of the 2001 GoM report that called for a comprehensive review of India's national security mechanisms
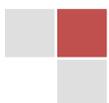
every five years.[8] Given the mandate enjoyed by the Narendra Modi government, it finds itself in an outstanding position to breathe new life into India's national security structure. The time for action is now, not later.

About the Author

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[8] "Group of Ministers (GoM) Report on Reforming the National Security System in pursuance of Kargil Review Committee Report", *Government of India*, 2001, pg. 119, available at http://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf