

THE NEW INDIAN GOVT. & NATIONAL SECURITY: PART V & LAST

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On coming to office in 1998, the BJP-led coalition set up a special task force headed by Shri K.C.Pant, the outgoing Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Shri Jaswant Sigh, who served as the Foreign Minister and subsequently Finance Minister of the outgoing Government, and Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, the then Director of the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), to examine the working of the national security management system in the USA, the UK and other countries and to make recommendations on the setting-up of a new national security management (NSM) infrastructure.

2. In December 1998, on the recommendations of this task force, a three-tier structure was set up, consisting of a National Security Council (NSC), a Strategic Policy Group (SPG) and a National Security Advisory Board (NSAB). The Indian NSC, like its US counterpart, is essentially a high-powered political body chaired by the Prime Minister and consisting of important members of his Cabinet directly concerned with national security issues. The SPG, which is chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, consists of serving senior officials responsible for policy-making and follow-up action in matters concerning national security plus the chiefs of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW), the external intelligence agency. Its main task is to make policy recommendations to the NSC.

3. The NSAB consists of senior retired officials, civilian as well as military, who had dealt with national security during their career as well as distinguished academics and non-governmental scholars. The head of the NSAB was designated as its Convenor. Shri K.Subramanyam, the highly distinguished doyen of the community of Indian strategic analysts, was designated as the first Convenor and, after he had completed a tenure of two years in June, 2001, Shri C.V.Ranganathan, a retired officer of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), who had, inter alia, served as the Indian Ambassador to China and France, was designated as the second Convenor in December 2001 and he has since completed his two-year term. There have so far been four NSABs, two headed by Subramanyam and two by Ranganathan. The fifth NSAB is yet to be

nominated.

4. The Task Force also recommended the creation of a post of National Security Adviser (NSA) to the Prime Minister and the setting-up of a National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), similar to its US counterpart. These recommendations were accepted. However, instead of appointing a separate officer as the NSA, Shri A.B.Vajpayee, the outgoing Prime Minister, reportedly on the recommendation of Shri Brajesh Mishra, his Principal Secretary, ordered that Shri Mishra would hold additional charge as the NSA.

5. The Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) of the Cabinet Secretariat, patterned after its British counterpart, was converted into the NSCS and entrusted with the tasks of assessment of intelligence, the co-ordination of the functioning of intelligence agencies and tasking them and acting as the interface between the NSC, the SPG and the NSAB and servicing their meetings. In the US, the NSA acts as the adviser to the President and as the national co-ordinator in all national security related matters and, at the same time, as the administrative and professional head of the NSCS, in which capacity he or she is responsible for its day-to-day running and maintaining a high level of professional competence.

6. Presumably in view of the dual charge of Mishra, this system was modified and a post of Secretary, NSCS, was created and the holder of the post was made responsible for the day-to-day running of the NSCS and its professional competence. Shri Satish Chandra, a serving officer of the IFS, who was previously the Indian High Commissioner in Pakistan, was appointed to this post and he has been asked to continue after his retirement. Initially, the NSCS was part of the Cabinet Secretariat, but in 2002, it was decided that it should be part of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).

7. The Task Force on the revamping of the intelligence apparatus set up by the outgoing Government in June 2000 in the wake of the enquiry into the Kargil conflict of 1999 by a high-powered Kargil Review Committee (KRC), chaired by Shri K.Subramanyam, had, inter alia, recommended the creation of a Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), a new agency for the collection of technical intelligence (TECHINT), a counter-terrorism centre in the IB to co-ordinate the counter-terrorism role of all agencies having a responsibility in this matter and a committee chaired by the NSA to co-ordinate the functioning of the intelligence agencies. These recommendations have been accepted and implemented and the NSCS has been given the additional task of follow-up action and monitoring in this regard.

8. The NSCS also monitors the implementation of the various recommendations made by three other special Task Forces set up by the Government to examine and report on internal security management, border management and defence management, which have been accepted by the Government.

9. Ever since this NSM infrastructure was set up, there has been a debate on certain aspects of it. The first relates to the advisability of the same individual holding both the posts of the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and the NSA. Many analysts and the KRC had advocated the appointment of a separate NSA, dealing exclusively with national security without any other responsibility. This was, however, not accepted by the BJP-led Government.

10. The second criticism related to the lack of expertise and experience of the NSA in matters relating to internal security management, law enforcement and intelligence management and the need for the Prime Minister to have the benefit of the advice of someone well versed in these fields.

11. The third criticism was about the NSCS. It was felt by many that while it had developed considerable area expertise, it was lacking in subject or domain expertise in fields such as counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism, counter-intelligence, counter-proxy war, counter-psywar etc.

12. After the KRC submitted its report towards the end of 1999, the late R.N.Kao, the founding father of the R&AW, had written to Prime Minister Vajpayee expressing his misgivings over some aspects of its report. The Prime Minister had sent for him for a detailed discussion on the report. It is understood that the three aspects mentioned were among the subjects which had figured in the discussions.

13. Shri Kao was learnt to have told the Prime Minister that while it was his privilege to combine the two posts, if he considered it necessary, and appoint anyone enjoying his confidence to the post, it had to be recognised at the same time that the present incumbent of the post of NSA had very little exposure to internal security and intelligence management. He, therefore, suggested for the Prime Minister's consideration that a new post of Deputy National Security Adviser (DNSA) should be created and that it should be filled up by someone well versed in internal security and intelligence management.

14. This suggestion was not implemented while Shri Kao was alive. However, after his death in January 2002, the designation of the Secretary, NSCS, another officer of the Indian Foreign Service, was changed as Deputy to the NSA. Thus, both the top posts in the newly-created national security management infrastructure were held by retired officers of the IFS, with little exposure to internal security and intelligence management and with practically no network of contacts in the internal security infrastructure of different State administrations.

15. When the NSAB was set up, the idea was that it would prepare an annual strategic review identifying areas calling for attention and options for action, in addition to undertaking such other tasks as allotted to it by the Government. The first NSAB submitted a report on the draft nuclear doctrine and a national security review. While its recommendation for releasing the draft nuclear doctrine to the public to encourage a national debate on it was accepted and it was released, its recommendation for releasing to the public its executive summary of the annual national security review was not accepted.

16. The second and third NSABs also submitted an annual national security review. The fourth was reportedly advised to discontinue the preparation of an annual national security review and to focus instead on submission of reports on topical areas of importance from the point of view of national security. It also reportedly undertook a detailed study of the subject of governance.

17. The NSABs made their recommendations largely on the basis of open information and insights gained during interactions with serving officers. They had very little access to information at the disposal of the Government. As a result, their reports often tended to be of a general nature and lacked focus. This was a criticism often levelled by serving officers with regard to their reports.

18. The Congress (I)'s policy document titled "ISSUES BEFORE THE NATION: SECURITY, DEFENCE AND FOREIGN POLICY" draws attention to what in its view are the inadequacies in the national security management infrastructure, but is vague on how it is going to remove these deficiencies. It says: "The Congress will formulate and implement a comprehensive multi-dimensional national security policy, which will cover vital aspects of energy security, food security, good governance and countering centrifugal trends affecting the country. The institutional arrangements made by the BJP-led NDA Government have been cosmetic. In substance, national security is not underpinned by structured and systematic institutional arrangements. The National Security Council, which was established since 1999, has not functioned with institutional cohesion. Important national security decisions have been taken in an ad hoc manner involving just a few individuals without utilizing the Cabinet Committee on Security, the Strategic Policy Group (comprising key secretaries, service chiefs and heads of intelligence agencies) and officials of the National Security Advisory Board. There has been no systematic interaction between the Strategic Policy Group and the National Security Advisory Board (NSAB). Nor there has been any regular interaction between National Security Advisor and the NSAB. The Congress will institutionalize regular meetings of the Cabinet Committee on Security. It will ensure systematic and institutional interactions between the National Security Advisor, the Strategic Policy Group and the National Security Advisory Board. The Congress will ensure necessary connectivity between the intelligence agencies of the Government of India and the National Security Advisory Board, as well as between the intelligence agencies and the Ministries of Defence and External Affairs."

19. Its main points of criticism can be summed up as follows:

- * Lack of institutional cohesion in the NSC.

- * Ad hocism in decision-making.

- * Lack of proper utilisation of the SPG and the NSAB in policy and decision making.

- * Lack of systematic interaction between the SPG and the NSAB.

- * Lack of adequate interaction between the NSA and the NSAB.

- * Lack of adequate interaction between the intelligence agencies and the NSAB.

20. These criticisms are validated by the following features of the functioning of the NSM infrastructure as set up by the BJP-led Government:

- * There were very few meetings of the NSC. Most decisions relating to national security were taken by the Cabinet Committee on Security.

- * The first NSAB had the benefit of some interactions with the Prime Minister and the NSA during the Kargil conflict of 1999. The second had two interactions with the NSA in its one-year tenure and none with the Prime Minister. The third had three interactions with the NSA and one with the Prime Minister just before the withdrawal of the Indian troops from the border in October, 2002. One does not know about the fourth NSAB.

- * The second NSAB had one interaction with the SPG and the third none. One does not know about the first and the fourth.

- * Neither the second nor the third NSAB had the benefit of any interaction with the chiefs of the intelligence agencies.

* Feed-backs from the Government on the reports and recommendations of the NSAB were few and far between and, even when received, tended to be vague.

21. A study of the Congress (I)'s policy document indicates that the incoming government intends retaining the NSM infrastructure as evolved by the outgoing Government and, at the same time, improving its functioning. While it has correctly identified its deficiencies, it is silent on how it proposes to remove them. This infrastructure has been in existence for five years now. One way of going about it would be for the Government to set up a special task force to study how this infrastructure has been functioning and make recommendations for modifications, considered necessary.

22. The revamping of the intelligence apparatus is another theme which has received attention from the Congress (I). Its policy document says: " The BJP/NDA Government's management of India's national intelligence institutions has been equally abysmal. There was the unpardonable failure in acquisition and utilization of advance intelligence about the hijacking of the Indian Airlines plane from Kathmandu to Kandahar, and about pre-empting the intrusions of the Pakistani Army into Kargil. The BJP/NDA Government failed to ensure necessary connectivity between intelligence agencies and the armed forces and the Ministry of External Affairs. Suggestions to remedy these failures made by expert groups, like the Subrahmanyam Committee, are languishing on the shelves, with no action taken. The Congress will undertake periodic functional audits and reforms of various institutions responsible for national security. In particular, it will undertake a restructuring of the intelligence agencies of the Government of India to improve its human resource basis with multi-dimensional expertise. It will ensure modernization of functional capabilities of the intelligence agencies with appropriate modern technological equipment and facilities. The recommendations made by the Experts Group to reform the Intelligence Agencies after the Kargil War, and which have been hanging fire for the last four years, will be speedily implemented. The Congress will ensure not only efficiency of but also accountability by the intelligence agencies."

23. There has been no comprehensive examination of the totality of India's intelligence capability since it became independent in 1947. There have, however, been four major enquiries into specific allegations of intelligence failure relating to the Sino-Indian war of 1962, the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, the outbreak of insurgency in Mizoram in 1966 and the undetected Pakistani intrusions into the Kargil heights in 1999. The reports of the first three enquiries were not released to the public or placed before the Parliament for a national debate by the Congress Governments then in power. The report of the KRC was released to the public by the BJP-led Government, but there was no debate on it in the Parliament. Follow-up action was taken on all these reports such as the revamping of the functioning of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and the external intelligence division of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the creation of the Directorate-General of Security after the enquiry into the failure of 1962; the bifurcation of the IB and the creation of the R&AW to deal exclusively with external intelligence after the enquiries into the failures of 1965 and 1966; and the setting-up of the DIA, a separate agency for TECHINT and a multi-disciplinary counter-terrorism centre after the KRC enquiry. Since the reports of the first three enquiries were not released to the public, one does not know which of their recommendations remained unimplemented.

24. These are essentially structural changes to create new organisations for undertaking certain tasks, but other requirements having a bearing on the adequacy and quality of performance of different agencies and the mechanism for their co-ordination have not so far received the required attention. Questions such as parliamentary oversight over the intelligence agencies, external evaluation of intelligence tasks and performance through a national intelligence advisory board, the need for a National Intelligence Adviser to improve co-ordination and act as the adviser to the Prime Minister on all intelligence-related matters etc have not received any attention so far.

25. While the Congress (I)'s policy document is silent on these and other specific issues, the leftists during the election campaign had stressed the importance of a national security apparatus that will work within the framework of a parliamentary democratic system. By this, they apparently meant the creation of a parliamentary oversight mechanism. This subject has been coming under consideration off and on since 1989 without any action being taken.

26. The Congress (I)'s allegation that the reports of the four special task forces set up in the wake of the KRC report have not been implemented is not correct. It is believed that about 70 per cent of the recommendations has been implemented.

27. Has their implementation led to a qualitative improvement in the performance of the intelligence apparatus, in respect of external as well as internal security? If not, why not? Those are among the questions which need to be addressed by the incoming Government. (Concluded).

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