

Sociology of Strategic Decision-Making and National Security Issues in India

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Experts on defence strategies now realise that strategic decision-making is not all about systematically working out 'scenarios' of events threatening a country's security and rationally assessing them taking note of the means available. They are aware that in practice decisions even on vital security concerns are influenced by the institutions that are involved in making them and by the dominant culture in such institutions. The specific manner in which culture conditions such decision-making exercises has not been adequately explored as yet. In this paper we address such an issue in the Indian context.

In exploring the cultural aspects of strategic decision-making in India the temptation to reify certain unique institutions and aspects of culture needs to be strongly resisted. This is necessary in order to avoid the tendency, which is marked especially in anthropological studies of India, to play down the processes, which are generating new interpretations of tradition and custom. Hence we take note of the currents of change that are sweeping across the country[1].

This study is based on intensive interviews conducted during September-December 1995 with 12 members of the decision-making elite. It consisted of two political leaders including a former minister of the Government of India, two retired military officers who are actively involved in strategic thinking, four retired foreign secretaries, two currently serving members of the India Foreign Service (IFS, henceforth), a senior journalist and a senior nuclear scientist who are involved with critical decisions regarding the atom bomb. It is on the basis of these interviews that we have constructed the culture of strategic decision-making in India. The analysis proceeds from the delineation of the institutional framework of strategic decision-making in India. This involves the identification of the critical institutions both inside the government and outside, and assessing the relations that obtain among these institutions. The institutions that we consider here are both formal organisations and they have enduring informal relationships. We observe that some of the formal structures of decision-making have become dormant and their work has been taken over by informal networks and we try to account for this phenomenon. The implications of the dominance of informal networks on the nature of decision-making have also been explored. In other words, we examine whether the decisions are influenced by ideologies and values rather than by political and economic interests. The exercise will also throw light on the nature of ideologies and values and the nature of the interests that influence strategic decision-making in India. We also note the emerging trends to anticipate changes in the pattern of strategic decision-making.

The Institutional Framework

The Parliament

According to the Indian Constitution, the Parliament is the supreme law-making institution in the country to which the rightfully elected government headed by the Prime Minister (PM) and his cabinet of ministers are accountable. The decisions and actions of the different ministers are subject to review and scrutiny by various standing committees, consultative committees of the respective ministers and the Estimate Committee, which are set up by the Parliament. These committees are constituted by the Parliament, the membership being restricted to the Members of Parliament (MPs). A few years ago the Parliament constituted the Standing committee on Defence headed by a senior member of the opposition to review the state of defence preparedness of the country every year. Besides these committees, the MPs can question the decisions and actions taken by the government when the two houses meet. The Parliament can also constitute, from time to time, enquiry committees to investigate serious allegations of misdemeanour and impropriety committed by the government and its functionaries. In the last few years, the Parliament constituted two such committees, one to investigate the scandal relating to the alleged pay-offs in the Government of India's (GOI) purchase of guns from a Swedish firm called the Bofors and another to investigate share market manipulation, called the security scam, by a share broker with the alleged collusion of several senior managers of public sector banks.

As the Parliament is only a legislative body, the actual task of decision-making vests with the PM and her/his cabinet of ministers. The cabinet has in turn set up special committees to take decisions on critical matters. The cabinet Committee on Political Affairs deals with important issues pertaining to national security. This Committee consisting of the Prime Minister (PM) the Minister for Home Affairs, the Minister for External Affairs and the Minister of Defence besides the Cabinet Secretary and the Secretaries of the constituent ministries is regarded as the apex decision-making body in the country. Some senior officers recollect that there used to be a Cabinet Committee on Defence, which is not functioning now.

Although the democratically elected bodies are vested with authority for decision-making and for ensuring that the decisions made are in the interests of the country, in practice, strategic decisions on national security are made elsewhere. This is in spite of the fact that some of the Parliamentary bodies have become vigilant in the recent years. For instance, the Standing Committee on Defence has been insisting since last year that the government should make public the report of the Committee on Defence Expenditure. In fact, the Estimates Committee has published several details regarding defence policies in its 1992-93 report. In a meeting held in March 1996 the Standing Committee on Defence urged the government to work out a clear defence policy for the country and make plans to induct the indigenously developed 'agni' intermediate range ballistic missiles into the defence system[2]. It is difficult to make out whether such reports are used as feedback to strategic planning or whether, like several other such reports, they are merely allowed to gather dust. These new trends are, however, at variance with the tradition of closed door approach that surrounds strategic decision-making exercises. To some extent, this tradition is attributable to the charismatic appeal of some former PMs such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. They could afford to ignore some of the formal procedures because of their mass support. To some extent the consensus that still obtains across the political spectrum on foreign policy, defence and national security matters also contribute to this "conspiracy of silence". Curiously, while the parliamentary committees seem to have become active, the frequency of meetings of the powerful Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs has dwindled in the last few years.

The PMO

The locus of strategic decision-making today is the Prime Ministers' Office (PMO, henceforth). The PMO attained its pre-eminence during Indira Gandhi's tenure as PM. Under the guidance of her Principal Secretary, P.N. Haskar, the PMO informally took over many of the co-ordinating functions that used to be performed by the Cabinet Secretariat under the supervision of the Cabinet Secretary. All decisions, which needed the PM's concurrence gradually, came to be referred to the PMO. Several political scientists hold that Indira Gandhi's regime was marked by concentration of power in the office of the PM and the consequent erosion of the authority of countervailing institutions, both inside and outside the government[3]. As a result even relatively trivial issues such as appointments of managing directors of government-run hotels began to be referred to the PMO. The PMO became the central decision-making office with various ministers and departments of the government providing the necessary information and other inputs for making decisions. Besides, the tendency of the PM to retain some of the key subjects and departments under his/her exclusive charge further increased the workload of the PMO. Thus, the Department of Atomic Energy which has been the PM's portfolio traditionally, the Research and Analysis Wing which is responsible for the collection of external intelligence, the Intelligence Bureau which gathers intelligence from within the country and the Central Bureau of Investigation directly report to the PM. Although the PMO gradually acquired personnel trained in different fields to deal with the growing volume and complexity of its work the important decisions related to strategic interests do not get the attention they deserve; even such decisions are processed in an ad-hoc manner.

The MEA

Strategic exercises, however, are conducted elsewhere in the government. Thus, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has an exclusive Policy Planning Division for the purpose. During Indira Gandhi's tenure, strategic thinking on foreign policy received a big boost when the then Minister of External Affairs, Mohan Kumaramangalam constituted a high-powered committee for policy planning. The committee was, however, disbanded when Kumaramangalam died in an air crash. Subsequently during Rajiv Gandhi's regime another committee on policy planning was set up under the Chairmanship of G. Parthasarathi to advise the Cabinet on policy planning. Even this committee did not survive for long as the PM felt that the briefs prepared by the august committee are so detailed that they could not be properly considered in Cabinet meetings, which are usually called to discuss urgent issues. Only the Policy Planning Division continues to play a critical role in assessing the international environment and in providing policy advice to the concerned ministers. The officials in the ministry claim that such advice is tendered only after receiving the necessary intelligence and other inputs from the other branches of the government.

The Ministry of Defence

The Defence Ministry naturally has a big stake in national security issues. The ministry which is in charge of the Army, Navy and Air Force and of Defence production has become active in internal security matters as well. In the recent past, the military has been frequently called to deal with terrorism and separatist movements. The ministry is also in charge of the Defence Research and

Development Organisation (DRDO) which seeks to develop indigenous technologies to meet the requirements of the armed forces for sophisticated modern weapons. The administrative work of the ministry is conducted by the civilian officers. The Secretary of the ministry is the main link between the armed forces and the civilian bureaucracy. During the period from 1984-86, when Arun Singh was the minister in charge of Defence, coordination between the armed forces and the civilian bureaucracy had been achieved in the form of informal Monday-morning meetings in which the three services chiefs, the Scientific Advisor to the government, the Director of the DRDO met the minister to review the events in the past week. This practice was given up when Arun Singh resigned from his post. At the level of the armed forces, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee operates to advise the government on all strategic issues of military importance. There is also the Defence Planning Staff engaged in strategic planning. The co-ordination between the three wings of the armed forces operates at several levels and comes to the forefront during combined military exercises.

Ministry of Home

The Ministry of Home Affairs, which is responsible for internal security also, plays a role in strategic planning. As the ministry, which is responsible for the maintenance of law and order, and internal security it is in charge of several police outfits established by the Central government. These police outfits include the Border Security Force, raised to police the country's borders during peace time, the Central Reserve Police, the Rapid Action Force to quell communal riots, the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, the National Security Guards to protect VIPs and the like. The ministry also collects intelligence through its police units, although as mentioned above the PMO now deals with the work of national level intelligence and investigative agencies. As the intelligence agencies have proliferated, coordination of their work and assessment of the intelligence gathered by them becomes critical. This job is handled by the Joint Intelligence Committee.

Ministry of Finance

A new trend in strategic decision-making exercises is the involvement of the Finance Ministry. Since the economy was opened up in 1991, India's need to expand foreign trade and attract foreign investment has injected economic considerations prominently in India's external relations. Some foreign policy analysts are of the view that India is now tilting towards the East, thereby implying that the country considers it important to establish friendly relations with Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam so that it can expand its market and benefit from the economic leverage of ASEAN which is a powerful economic block in the world[4].

Autonomous Bodies

Strategic planning in the country has received a big boost with the proliferation of autonomous institutions to study various aspects of strategic planning and issues related to defence policies. The Centre for Policy Research, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis and the United Services Institution of India bring together scholars and experts in military studies and strategy, foreign policy and in national security issues. Retired personnel as well as officers on deputation

from the armed forces get opportunities to interact with each other and undertake research. The growth of these institutions has given a fillip to the publication of journals devoted to strategic studies and planning.

The description provided above makes it evident that although the government is yet to benefit from comprehensive and systematic planning on national security, there are now institutions both within the government and outside engaged in strategic planning exercises. But these exercises remain fragmentary and ad-hoc because the government, so far, was undecided about the establishment of the National Security Council, in spite of the fact that a commitment to do so was made as early as 1989 and was renewed in late 1995.*

Another major force outside the government influencing policies on national security strategies is the national press. The major English language newspapers have played a critical role in influencing public opinion. By publishing investigative reports and by systematically bringing to light foreign and local events, which are of vital concern to national security, these national newspapers have brought the pressure of public opinion to bear on strategic decision-making. The newspapers are now so influential that the editor of a leading national daily once remarked that, in importance, his post is next only to that of the PM in the country!

Relationship among the Institutions

The relationships that obtain among the institutions mentioned are not clearly delineated. Thus, it is not clear how the Cabinet Secretariat which functions under the Cabinet Secretary who is supposed to be the senior-most civil servant, stands in relation to the PMO. It is also not clear how the Secretaries in the various ministries relate themselves to the PMO on the one hand and the Cabinet Secretariat on the other. Newspapers occasionally hint at tension and conflict between these institutions. Our interviews with retired IFS officers revealed that informal co-ordination has been achieved mainly because the officials in the PMO prefer to remain in the background because they need the cooperation and support from the 'steel frame' of the bureaucracy to be of effective assistance to the PM. They also mentioned that it ultimately depends on the equation that the PM achieves with the officials. While some PMs, have relied more on the PMO, others have taken into confidence the senior Secretaries in the government in making vital decisions.

The implication of the PMO becoming the apex of decision-making in the government is the importance of officials who get to work in this office. These officials process vital information and gain access to important senior officers and political leaders. Invariably those who get recruited in the PMO are hand-picked men and women who are regarded as both trustworthy and efficient by the Prime Minister and/or his senior advisors. Those who work in the PMO are usually drawn from different departments and ministries. Officials, senior as well as those lower down the hierarchy, covet an assignment in the PMO. The officials who worked in the PMO have invariably been rewarded with important assignments within the country and outside by the PM. The PMO has acquired an elite status in the bureaucratic hierarchy although the officials there prefer to play down their importance. Although the PMO is the top decision-making centre in the government, the officials who dominate the MEA, mainly drawn from the IFS, consider themselves as experts on strategic issues. Their claim is based on the fact that strategic security decisions have to consider foreign policy options as a major component. Also, as mentioned above, it is this ministry

which has acquired considerable experience in policy planning exercises. This, combined with the fact that MEA till recently used to be under the direct charge of the Prime Minister or of a senior Cabinet minister, has given it and its officials an elite status. Of late the ministry is losing some of its shine. Forces of globalization have enhanced the importance of economic diplomacy and of officials from the ministries of commerce and finance. Further, trade delegations consisting of private entrepreneurs, businessmen and representatives of financial and trade bodies have become important participants in Indian government's diplomatic missions. The IFS is nowadays no longer considered as a prestigious cadre by the candidates who appear for the competitive exams conducted by the Union Public Service Commission for recruitment to Class 1 posts of the Government of India.

The Defence Ministry, which is critically involved in decisions on national security is no longer considered a high-profile wing of the government. In fact, it is no longer the case that a senior Cabinet minister is in charge of the defence portfolio. In the recent past relatively junior ministers have been assigned the portfolio. Further, international pressures on the government to reduce the budget for defence and to abandon technological upgradations of defence related items have contributed to the seeming downgradation of defence priorities. To make matters worse, the men of the armed forces feel that their voice is not heard in the corridors of power. They complain that the old fear of a military takeover continues to haunt the political leaders because even today the Chiefs of the three services have to send their papers and proposals to the joint secretaries in the ministry. They complain that military personnel are hardly called upon to take up administrative responsibilities even in the Defence ministry, which is dominated by members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). Hence they feel that the views of the armed forces on various matters concerning national security are not properly considered by the civilian bureaucracy and the political leaders[5]. The sense of alienation felt by the military personnel is somewhat shared by the police personnel as well. The police, who are usually deputed to the intelligence agencies, feel that the civilian bureaucracy, especially the IAS personnel corner all the powerful senior posts in the government and do not allow persons from other services to occupy such offices even when the concerned post requires the professional expertise that they do not possess. The members of the Indian Police Service, in a representation they recently made to the newly constituted Pay Commission, have demanded status and promotional opportunities equalling the IAS.

The scientists who are associated with strategic decision-making also feel the dominance of the civilian bureaucracy. But thanks to the efforts of distinguished scientists such as Homi Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai, several scientific organisations funded by the government such as the Atomic Energy Commission and the Indian Space Research Organisation have managed to acquire considerable autonomy in their work. Considering the importance of scientific research for national security the successive PMs have treated scientists with respect and have given them direct access. This special treatment has not exactly endeared the scientists to the civilian bureaucracy, which is conscious of protocol, seniority and proper procedures.

Cultural Dimension

The institutional framework delineated above has in some important ways influenced the cultural aspects of strategic decision-making in India. It can be gleaned from the above description that there are distinct subcultures at work. Thus, for instance, the political leaders tend to project

themselves as important decision-makers. One MP pointed out how even MPs belonging to the opposition have been taken into confidence by narrating the instance of Atal Bihari Vajpayee—leader of the opposition — heading an Indian delegation for an important meeting of a UN forum where Pakistan was attempting to embarrass India by passing a resolution on Kashmir. The politicians hold that they extensively discuss and debate issues concerning vital security matters in the appropriate fora. If, however, their contributions to strategic decision-making are not widely known, it is, according to them, because of the need to ensure that there is no leakage of secrets. They also hold that discussions on national security and external affairs are rarely controversial and hence do not catch the attention of the media. But only a few politicians are interested in foreign policy and strategic issues. Those who are keenly interested were themselves in the armed forces or in the bureaucracy. The remaining MPs, prefer to let the ‘experts’ discuss and handle strategic issues. It is this ‘indifference’ that is regarded as the cause for strategic decision-making getting closeted in the PMO. One of the MPs interviewed has become a champion of the NSC so that politicians could discuss threadbare strategic planning issues with officials and experts who are called to express their views. He is one of the few who is keen on greater transparency in strategic decision-making. Of late, he has been able to persuade his MP colleagues in demanding the constitution of the NSC and inject greater transparency in strategic decision-making.

Opinion on the NSC, however, seems to be divided. Some of the political leaders see some advantages in the existing style of functioning. The present set up, they feel, allows the decision-makers to push to the background decisions and actions which they find embarrassing to defend in public. Thus, one MP recalled that the government was able to defy the US trade embargo on Cuba without actually appearing to do so because of the flexibility inherent in the existing institutional framework. If we note also the fact that this is the opinion of a MP belonging to the opposition we can infer that the political culture in India is not entirely conducive for an overhaul of the system of strategic decision-making.

The present institutional framework is also perceived as encouraging the culture of “taking decisions not to take decisions”. Thus, a retired high-ranking member of the IFS pointed out that political leaders have deliberately undermined decisions on foreign policy to gain petty political advantages. He pointed out that a decision to encourage trade and people-to-people contact between India and Pakistan was deliberately scuttled by some politicians because it was then not in the interest of the ruling party. He recalled another instance when a PM refused to honour the commitment of the previous regime in regard to bilateral cultural exchange with another European nation because he felt such a decision would harm his political image. This view of the political culture was also shared by the men of the armed forces who strongly felt the need for a clear national defence policy. The absence of such a policy, according to them, encourages the political system to change national security objectives to gain short-term advantages. They commented in particular on the ‘non-decisions’ in regard to the induction of the indigenously developed Prithvi and Agni missiles. It is for this reason that they admire independent ministers who can give clear directions. They regret that in the recent years the defence ministry in particular has been unable to attract such a minister or retain him for any length of time.

The MEA Culture

Such differences in perceptions occur in respect of different segments of the bureaucracy as well... Thus, the members of the IFS in the MEA feel that the officers in the Ministry of Home Affairs are unable to appreciate their work. They refer to the constant complaints against the MEA about their seemingly soft attitude towards across-the-border terrorism in spite of the production of what they regard as sufficient evidence to implicate Pakistan. They feel that to convince the international diplomatic community, evidence should not only be authentic but it should also be made to appear authentic. They prefer 'unimpeachable' evidence that can be corroborated by independent international agencies to persuade and convince foreign diplomatic missions and governments. They say that the art of effective persuasion in diplomacy involves three R's viz., Reasonableness, Restraint and Reinforcement of the same point from diverse angles. They felt that one could take a forceful stand without 'shouting from the roof top' as the people in other ministries do. In fact, they assert that it is this sort of quiet diplomacy which enabled the MEA to checkmate the designs of Pakistan in spite of severe erosion of India's secular credentials in the world after the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was pulled down by some Hindu nationalist organisations in 1992. They also discount the recent outbursts in the national press in regard to the country succumbing to the US interests by referring to the excellent relations that India has developed with Iran in the recent years. They argue that in international relations it is possible to be friendly with two mutually hostile countries provided discreet diplomatic strategies are adopted. Hence, they are not in agreement with those who want greater transparency in matters concerning national security. They hold that the country's interests are better served when certain policies and decisions are deliberately not given wide publicity. A serving bureaucrat even hinted that some critical newspaper reports of the governments' US tilt might have been deliberately planted by the government as part of a wider diplomatic strategy. It can of course be made out from such comments that the concerned officers, favour the preservation of prevalent diplomatic practices that rely on covert and 'delicate' handling of international relations by the IFS. It can also be made out that the members of the IFS feel that only they possess the requisite knowledge and experience. The other members of the civilian bureaucracy regard the views of the IFS officers as elitist. They feel that the IFS is no longer capable of handling international issues that have become exceedingly complex as a result of globalization, the fall of USSR and the world-wide upsurge of Islam. They are of the view that modern diplomacy involves hard economic and political bargaining for which the IFS officers are not suited. Another complaint often made is that the IFS officers now lack an ideological orientation that has made it difficult for them to cope with the shifting international situation, "How can such officers evolve strategic options?" they ask. As already noted, such differences in perceptions obtain between the police officers and the civilian bureaucracy. Thus, there is strong resentment against what is perceived as 'elitist attitudes' of the IAS and IFS by the members of other cadres.

Divisions within MEA

Such perceptual differences exist within some of the cadres as well. As one IFS officer puts it, within the IFS itself there are two 'schools of thought' namely the K.P.S. Menon school and the Girija Shankar Bajpai school. According to him the Menon school is left-inclined whereas the Bajpai school is liberal. He was of the view that these ideological differences have influenced foreign policy only in terms of its broad orientation. He stated that career prospects of the officers were not drastically affected by such differences because it is 'access' to important ministers and senior officers that mattered more. To gain 'access' he said it was necessary to be a pleasant and

gregarious person who is willing to help others; but more important are qualities such as hard work, capacity for judgement and ability.

In the MEA the existence of two schools of thought may not have crystallised into intense rivalry but this is not the situation in other wings of the government. Thus, the intense rivalry among the different police forces and the three intelligence agencies prevents speedy and effective coordination among them. Pointing to this intense rivalry a MP, we interviewed, stated that he often had to informally intervene and pull-up the concerned officers belonging to different intelligence agencies, the police and the civilian bureaucracy so that an effective campaign to check smuggling of narcotics and drugs is mounted by the government. This MP got involved in such problems because of an international project on drug trafficking that he was directing under the auspices of an institute that he has set up.

The Scientists

Perceptual differences also obtain between the scientists who work in the government and the civilian bureaucracy including the IFS and the IAS. A senior scientist remarked that the country has virtually no policy on science and technology because the political leaders are wrongly advised by the bureaucrats. He pointed out that one reason for the country being unable to protect its interests in the Uruguay round of negotiations on General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs was that scientists were not included in the negotiations. He was of the opinion that if the Intellectual Property Rights regime is today discriminatory towards India it is because the bureaucrats did not adequately consult the scientists. He also said that the same attitude was responsible for the country being forced by the Western nations to accept their norms and technology for the safeguard of nuclear plants in India although the Indian standards and devices were far superior. This is attributed to the fact that the bureaucrats who dominated the Indian negotiating team could not understand the technical details adequately to persuade the team from the International Atomic Energy Agency about the superiority of Indian nuclear technology. He felt that ever since Indira Gandhi's death in 1984 the Department of Atomic Energy has been neglected and starved of funds. He felt that after registering such spectacular advances in nuclear technology the decision-makers had no right to freeze the atomic energy programme. He also blames the subsequent PMs for not grasping the enormous potential of the programme for peaceful uses including the generation of electricity.

The Journalists

The senior journalists who work for leading national newspapers speak of their role in holding the government and the political leadership accountable to the country. It has already been mentioned how a chief editor of a leading national newspaper declared that his job was second only to that of the PM in importance. A senior journalist was of the view that just like the political leaders the newspapers also have their constituencies consisting of the readers who form the public opinion in the country. Hence, he said that newspapers would have to play an independent role. This sense of self-importance is reflected in his claim that newspapers and therefore journalists as well, actively participate in strategic decision-making. He narrates instances of the government being forced to change its decisions on critical strategic issues because of the press expose. He also referred to an article written in a leading daily stating in categorical terms that the government had decided to put

on hold the decision to induct the Agni and Prithvi missiles into the country's defence system under sustained pressure from the USA. This exposure of the government in that article, he said, forced it to change its policy and issue a public denial. He said that forces of market competition have forced journalists to take independent stands. "The government can no longer cultivate journalists and expect them to 'to work with it hand in glove' as was the case before," he said. This journalist also mentioned that he has remained independent in spite of several temptations dangled before him. He said that if only he had taken a 'progressive' position on Kashmir by advocating the rights of the people of the valley to decide about their future instead of taking a strongly pro-India stand, he would have been busy attending many international conferences on Kashmir all over the world and would have become an international celebrity. But while proudly testifying to his 'independence' he inadvertently exposed the subtle pressure to conform that operates in the world of journalism.

The Inner Circle

Thus, the institutional framework of strategic decision-making in India is marked by perceptual differences between different branches of the government, which are generating undercurrents of intense rivalry. But the situation was not so bad a few decades ago. Some of our interviews vividly recalled the days of Indira Gandhi when the institutional framework was more coherent. Indira Gandhi, it is said, had appointed her close associates during her student days in England to important positions in the government and relied on their advice in taking critical strategic decisions. Thus it is well known that her cabinet colleague, Mohan Kumaramangalam, her Principal Secretary, P.N. Haskar, and a few others belonged to her inner circle of advisors. Some of the members of the inner circle shared her Kashmiri Pandit caste background, but the common cultural capital they shared was a left-of-the-Centre sensibility that prevailed in Cambridge University and the London School of Economics during the 1930s and 1940s. It is this shared background that made it possible for her team to work smoothly. But it is also to be noted that the compositions of her inner circle kept changing. Although a sense of loyalty bound her advisors to her, the relationships were marked by certain objective criteria of efficiency. A leading scientist who played a critical role in shaping Indira Gandhi's nuclear policy admired her leadership qualities. Her capacity to quickly grasp a problem and take clear decisions and the trust and confidence she reposed in her colleagues also inspired people to work for her. Similarly, officials who desired to gain 'access' to the PM knew that their cultural capital could only carry them some distance. They had to demonstrate their professional and administrative abilities in getting their assignments done.

Such networks of personal relationships operated to create an inner circle of power under the regimes of subsequent PMs as well. Thus when Morarji Desai succeeded Indira Gandhi, his inner circle of advisors also changed. One of the IFS officers who had earlier served under Indira Gandhi did not admire Morarji Desai's personality and his friendship with the Sri Lankan President Jayawardane and hence got himself transferred to another post. A scientific advisor quit his job because Morarji Desai treated him like 'a school boy' and did not respect his professional achievements. The new team of advisors consisted of Gujarati officials and others who had earlier served Morarji Desai. This pattern of inner circle formation has been continuing to date.

The networks of personal relationships extend beyond the government. For instance, Indira Gandhi's inner circle also consisted of some leading journalists. During the days prior to her government's declaration of Emergency, it was possible for Indira Gandhi to take journalists into confidence about important international issues and get them to publish material which boosted her and her government's image. Some favoured journalists were co-opted to 'plant stories' in newspapers as part of an overall strategy worked out by government. Such networks were also active in the constitution of delegations representing the country in various international conferences and seminars. Over the years the spread of such networks seems to have narrowed down. There is also a corresponding enlargement of the social field.

Role of Ideology

The importance of networks of personal relationships raises issues about the role of values and ideologies in decision-making. As these networks utilise a variety of criteria including caste, common regional background, linguistic affinity, old school-boy ties and ideological orientation, it may be inferred that the values and ideologies that support them get reinforced. In fact, it is possible to argue that viewing the overall situation a left ideological orientation has structured strategic decisions in India especially till the 1980s[6]. Such an argument, however, misses the compromises that have to be made in adapting the ideology to practical problems. A distinguished former diplomat and policy planning advisor remarked that in solving concrete problems which were posing threats to national security what helped him was not ideology but his ability to establish personal rapport with his 'adversaries' so that a workable and honourable solution to the crisis could be found. While he admitted the broad left orientation that influenced him in his work, he said that he could never ignore the fact that India's economic plans were critically dependent on foreign aid from the USA. He, therefore, felt that the best policy for India to adopt was non-alignment. He said that India has voted with the USA on 99% of the occasions wherein there was voting at the UN. If, however, the USA viewed India as not friendly it was because that country wanted India's support to be cent per cent.

While the policy planners were keen to demonstrate that commitment to an ideological orientation do not prevent them from being pragmatic, ideologies nevertheless have a way of foreclosing consideration of certain pragmatic alternatives. This was brought home to one of the authors of this study in a casual conversation in April 1996 with a member of the Standing Committee on Defence who belonged to one of the left parties. In response to a query about the role played by the Standing Committee in regard to strategic planning he pointed out that the committee had brought out the dire need for modernisation of the Indian defence forces. He said that the problem of spare parts which has become acute since the fall of the Soviet Union combined with the World Bank and IMF strictures on reducing defence expenditure had thrown the defence production system out of gear. He went on to remark that these defects will only be set right if in the General Elections to be held toward the end of the month the National Front-Left Front combination came to power. This remark triggered off a comment by one of those assembled that may be India can follow Brazil's approach of encouraging the private sector to enter the field of defence production. The MP ruled out the idea entirely stating that it will lead to rampant gun running and will abet terrorism!

It is well known that most of those who played a critical role in shaping decisions on India's national security were influenced by Nehruvian socialist ideas. But as mentioned earlier, there was

a liberal school of thought with which the socialists had to content. But these two ideological streams blended with what the decision-makers felt were essentially Indian values. In fact, ideologies did not pose serious problems in practice. A former foreign secretary spoke of the Indian civilizational value of tolerance and the ideological tradition of sorting out disputes through consensus as providing the value frame for India's foreign policy. He, in fact, pointed out that it is the same spirit that made him co-operate with us on the SIPRI- sponsored project although the institute has not thought it necessary to correct certain information it published about India even after several glaring mistakes in it were pointed out by him! Thus, ideologies whether socialist or liberal, could both be flexibly interpreted as being in agreement with what the decision-makers considered as 'basic' Indian values. The ideologies allowed considerable room for accommodation of a variety of practices but as we have seen above they can also act as blinkers and rule out consideration of some plausible alternatives. Thus, our evidence only partially confirm A.K. Ramanujan's observation about the India way of thinking being contextual; it nevertheless is prone to limiting the range of contexts considered[7].

Some Recent Trends

The political culture of decision-making described above is undergoing rapid changes in recent years. The hold of charisma is loosening all around as charismatic leaders have been shown up by the media as vulnerable persons who are as prone to make mistakes as others. In fact, recent events only confirm that the mistakes made by charismatic leaders prove to be much more expensive than those committed by lesser mortals. Policies of economic liberalisation have worked against centralisation of power and authority. The sweeping powers of intervention in social and economic affairs that the government enjoyed have now been diluted considerably. Thanks to the publicity given in the last few years to several scandals and incidents of corruption involving prominent political leaders, public pressure for greater transparency is mounting on the political system. In response to the media exposure of corruption in high places, the activist role assumed by the judiciary is also eroding the culture of personalism in the government. As officials can no longer derive protection from their political bosses and are being held accountable for their acts of commission and omission, trends towards delegation of powers and autonomy to the various branches and departments of the government can be perceived. These trends are getting reinforced by the realisation that the task of governance of the economy and society, which is rapidly getting drawn into the vortex of globalization, is becoming increasingly complex. The growing complexity of state management makes it virtually impossible for small coteries to monopolise power. Hence, when an incident of arms dropping which occurred a few months ago in the Purulia district of West Bengal exposed the lack of coordination among different security agencies in the country the debate on the setting up of a NSC again gained momentum.

Changing cultural trends are eroding elitism that marks certain branches of the government. As has been earlier pointed out, the exclusive identity of the IAS and IFS cadres is being challenged. Pressures to change are mounting from within these two exclusive cadres. With the implementation of the reservation policy for backward classes the urban middle class upper caste ethos of the cadres is changing. As the officers will increasingly view issues on the basis of diverse cultural backgrounds pressures towards explicit transactions and greater transparency in official dealings and in strategic decision-making will mount.

Conclusion

Thus, this study of decision-making on strategies pertaining to national security in India points out that despite the adoption of an institutional framework of parliamentary democracy which recognised delegation of powers and accountability to the Parliament, in practice, the dominance of charismatic political leaders and trends towards centralisation worked to enhance the importance of coteries in decision-making especially on sensitive subjects such as defence, internal security and international relations. Personal relationships and a culture of personalism became dominant in decision-making. The personal relationships that were forged were not entirely dependent on ascriptive factors such as caste, linguistic background, old school/college ties and the like. Achievement and competence also counted which made these personal networks inherently unstable.

The culture of strategic decision-making and more particularly the approach the decision-makers adopted towards strategic decision-making could be inferred from their ideological positions and values. While they demonstrated flexibility in attempting to synthesise diverse value systems and ideologies and while they made efforts to point out that their approach to strategic issues was practical and pragmatic, their ideological orientation acted as blinkers to certain practical options much unlike the Chinese approach of “walking on two legs”.

The recent political and cultural changes in the country are gradually upturning the political culture of personalism and elitism in strategic decision-making. The emerging trends indicate that the divisions in the institutional framework cannot any longer be held together by personal networks. There is a marked tendency towards autonomy and decentralisation of power among the various institutions involved in strategic decision-making. Moreover, strategic planning is itself becoming increasingly complex in the contemporary world requiring expertise in foreign policy, economics, strategic studies, military affairs, technology of weapons system, anti-terrorist planning and collection of intelligence and its assessment. All these developments are eroding the culture of personalism and secrecy that influenced strategic decision-making.

A note of caution is however necessary to end this paper. While the trends promise openness in decision-making it is imperative that the skills required to manage and govern a system which is becoming increasingly complex are developed all round. This calls for the adoption of modern management practices and all round human resource development. It also implies the acceptance of an ideology of meritocracy, which has become an anathema in recent years. The biggest challenge that the Indian decision-making elite will face in the coming years will be in reconciling the politics of ‘social justice’ which has made a virtue of reservation for backward castes and the practical exigencies of governance and development.

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