

**Identifying and Promoting Goals
to Build Confidence and Trust in Civil-Military
Relations in Bangladesh**

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Civil-Military Relations (CMR) in Bangladesh is a discourse of considerable academic and practical salience for at least three specific reasons. First, Bangladesh is a country, which with a background of long and sustained struggle for self-assertion, finally emerged as a state-entity out of a Liberation War in which both the civil and the military elements had fought in unison and shoulder to shoulder to ward off the occupation forces. Moreover, the military worked professionally during the Liberation War under an astute political leadership; thus creating one of the finest examples of CMR even in a war situation. Second, and an unpleasant surprise as it was, a country such as this with an assuring background of CMR had to go through the shocking phase of a praetorian army on the prowl to meddle in politics between 1975 and 1990. Third, despite such a dismal CMR track-record during the above-mentioned period there has been a positive turn-around since the 1990s as the military eschewed/had to eschew at least three occasions to be in the political saddle. As of now, the Bangladesh military is in a progressively steady process of transforming itself from having been for sometime praetorian to being professional. But in the overall context, there remains some more points to ponder *vis-à-vis* CMR in Bangladesh; the major one being how to retrieve the kind of trust between the civil and the military that featured during the Liberation War.

While analysing the core theme in both pre and post-1990 perspectives the discussion is rounded off with a lead on the desired shape and contours of CMR in Bangladesh. Beginning with a relevant conceptual construct the discussion brings in five more sections to flesh out the relevant themes. Thus the section that follows the conceptual one is about the two components of CMR in Bangladesh.

The third section is a review of politicisation of military between 1972 and 1990; and the following section is about militarisation of politics from 1975 through 1990. The fifth section analyses the post-1990 CMR. The sixth section suggests the doables in constructing a bridge of trust between the civil and the military.

I

Conceptual Construct

CMR, as Samuel P. Huntington argues, covers the whole gamut of interactions of military and political forces in a given state.¹ The problem of CMR is common to almost all the states, but which becomes acute in societies “where no orderly tradition of power and obedience has yet been established --- or those where it has been destroyed --- military force is the final and sometimes the only arbiter in government. But societies which achieve subordination of military to political authority and control of government by legal restraint and popular will are found to be freed from the problem of CMR.”²

Bangladesh does not differ much from the Third World CMR scenario both during and after the Cold War. During the Cold War the Third World countries lacked the kind of CMR characteristics found in the developed democracies. The deficit of these countries was in the “objective civilian control” over the military involving at least four components: 1. Professionalism and recognition by the military officers of the limits of their professional competence; 2. effective subordination of the military to the policy-making political elite; 3. recognition and acceptance by the political elite of an area of

professional competence and autonomy for the military; and 4. minimisation of military interference in politics and of political intervention in the military.³

But the end to the Cold War signalled a turn-about in such a scenario, and there was simultaneous proliferation of democratic practices as alternatives to authoritarian and military regimes. A wind of change swept across places as diverse as Latin America, Eastern Europe, South Asia, the Pacific Rim and the erstwhile Soviet Union; and there was discernible role reversal of the military. Many of these countries have for the first time put in place mechanisms for civilian oversight of their militaries through rewritten or revamped constitutions. Some of these countries even have had their new civilian defense ministries exercising their new authorities. But despite some such upbeat scenarios there remains an observed uncertainty as to the proper role of the military in a democratising country. A classic example of such uncertainty has been provided in the recent past when an elected government eased itself out in Nepal on the issue of interrelationship between prime minister and army chief, and thus pushing the country into a political quagmire as well as jeopardising the fledgling democratisation process. Professor Joseph Nye suggests at least two probable manifestations of this kind of uncertainty. First, there may be something like a military overreach, whereby people look for salvation from the military, and thus leading to re-politicisation of the military. In the post-communist Russia there was the reported pressure on the military to become involved in public safety against the threats of secessionism and political intrigues. Second, there may be military exclusion from the civil

society whereby civilians may tend to consider the military a threat to the nation.⁴

Such uncertainties, aside we may again refer back to some positive trends. A consensus, for example, seems to have gained ground that the “objective civilian control” is in the interests of both the military and the civilian political authority. It is reported that military leaders across the vulnerable countries have learned the hard lesson that intractable socio-economic and political problems defy easy solutions, and which are beyond their competence. Politicisation of the military sacrifices, as Alfred Stepan shows, the military as an institution to the military as government. This is one reason why so many military regimes in Latin America have voluntarily surrendered power.⁵ Moreover, it has been observed that unlike economic reform, civil-military relations reform involves few costs, but produces enormous benefits; the major one being the bridge of trust between the military and society.

This perspective of military arrival in politics during the Cold War period, and their withdrawal, albeit generally, in the post-Cold War period closes with a reference to the typology of *coups*. This is done with the intent to show how and why *coups* take place; and also that *coup* – conducive circumstances are not totally absent in some countries, and may recur in others. The list of some countries with such scenarios may include Brazil, Chile, Nicaragua, South Korea, Turkey, Pakistan and some African countries.

Coups may be of three types. The first one is ‘guardian *coup*’ which takes place when the military intervenes to save the state from civilian misconduct, and returns to barracks after a short stint in power for cleansing the administration. Although rare, such *coups* did take place in Nigeria after independence. The second type concerns

'veto *coup*' which is impelled by changes or possibility of changes that threaten military interests. The Algerian *coup* of 1992 was such an instance. The third type is provided by what is known as the 'breakthrough *coup*'. In such a *coup* the military throws out a redundant regime in an attempt to effect a break from the past. The 1974 Ethiopian *coup* following the end to Emperor Haile, Selassie's 44-year 'traditional rule' ended up creating a socialist state.

II

Components of CMR in Bangladesh

As is conceptualised CMR is two-dimensional and encompasses relations between the society as a whole and the military. But, in reality, much of the interaction involves only the ruling elite and the military. In the Bangladesh context, the two components of CMR share one common feature of being weak from within. Obviously, such weakness is linked to the lack of cohesiveness, factious nature and absence of professionalism; and which explain much of what went wrong in CMR from 1975 through 1990.

It is widely accepted that weakness and failure of political elite bring about military interventions in politics. But at the same time, it should also be mentioned that no *coup* takes place until a nexus is established between the military and at least some members of the political elite. If so, both sides should be deemed to be deviating from their respective institutional ethos and professional ethics. An analysis of what happened between 1975 and 1990 confirms these two generalisations. Throughout these years military rule and

civilianised military rulers were sustained in power by the active support and assistance of some segments of the political elite.

On the other hand, the new army in independent Bangladesh had to start off as a divided entity both horizontally and vertically. There appeared divisions between the freedom fighters and the Pakistan-repatriate armies. This division was further widened as the freedom fighters received two years' seniority. The creation of an elite force called *Jatiya Rakshi Bahini* (JRB) with special status and privileges left the regular army sulking. Alongside such group-based divisions there was also in those initial years an ideological divide. The repatriates were found to have retained the outlook that had been gained in Pakistan regarding the structure and function of the army. The freedom fighters were also divided on the issue. One group had a vision for a conventional army; while there was another group with a revolutionary idea of transforming the army into a kind of 'productive army' on the model of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Perhaps the worst manifestation of the divided army was during the August 1975 *coup*. As senior army officer's retained their control at cantonments, the *coup* leaders with eight tanks (without ammunition) and a small troop were able to turn *Bangabhaban* into a state within a state. Somewhat bewildered Khaled Mosharraf and Shafaat Jamil, the two senior officers, were reported to have fumed: "Two armies cannot exist in one country."

It is thus apparent that the two parts of the CMR equation in Bangladesh were weak during those fateful years; and, as such were likely to be dysfunctional. It necessarily follows that for whatever was amiss during those years both the civilian and the military elites would have to bear the responsibility. But, again, the primary responsibility

falls on the civilian elite. While saying so the factors of ambition and machination of the *coup* leaders are also not kept beyond the view. In the post-1990 period both the components have demonstrated their institutional ethos; there have been political governments in power through elections, and the military eschewed any meddling in politics. But it is not, however, suggested that an ideal situation prevails; there are challenges, both apparent and lurking.

III

Politicisation of the Military 1972-1990

In fact, the Liberation War turned out to be a prelude to CMR scenario that would unfold immediately after independence. Despite the initial statement that the Liberation War CMR scenario was satisfactory it is now posited that even then there were at least two sources of irritants. First, a politically-oriented guerilla force called the *Mujib Bahini* was raised to counter-balance not only the independent actions of the regular forces but also the *Mukti Bahini* and other freedom fighters belonging to different ideological groups.⁷ Second, by bestowing the ranks of Major General and Brigadier upon 177 MNAs and 270 MPs the *Mujibnagar* government sought to consolidate its control over the military leadership; and this move did pique all the eleven sector commanders who were in the rank of major.⁸ Most of all, the freedom fighters were reported to have resented the fact that while they were waging the war and confronting the enemy under all types of adverse circumstances the political leaders were passing a safer life away from the battlefields.⁹

There were at least four stages both during the Liberation War and after in the process of politicization of the Bangladesh army. First, the crucial stage was when this army harboured heightened role expectation; and in the making of which the experience of the

Liberation War was a significant component. The armed professionals comprising the East Bengal Regiment (EBR), East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and police were the first to organize armed resistance to the Pakistani onslaught; and by doing so they had revolted against established professional rules and ran the risk of court martial. Alongside spin-offs in the professional life they wanted a role in the affairs of the nation. But, as it was, such a role perception did not find favour with the civilian authority of the independent country.

Second, a constricted resource-base of the war-devastated country and prioritization of the civilian authority did not allow for the army their expected perks and perquisites. Consequently, there developed the myth of deliberate neglect of the defence services. Coupled with this myth was the perception of a threatened corporate interest catalysed mostly by the creation of JRB.

Third, the army had the experience of participating in aid to the civil administration and thereby became aware of the latter. Between July 1973 and July 1974 the army, JRB and police were used intermittently for combing operations against miscreants, smugglers, hoarders, and in some cases, against political opponents. But the operations were abruptly called off when it was found out that a good number of persons rounded up belonged to the ruling coterie. Moreover, on the ground of reported excesses during the combing operations as many as 22 junior officers were either dismissed or permanently retired from the service.¹⁰

Fourth, political indoctrination had a fair share in politicizing the Bangladesh armed forces. It is interesting to note that politicization was writ large in the conceptualization of a productive army on the Chinese model. Linked to the retired Colonel Abu Taher, a valiant sector commander, this was to be an alternative model for the Bangladesh army.¹¹ The incipient politicization of the army became apparent during the two days preceding the 7 November Sepoy Uprising when the *Biplobi Sainik Sangstha* circulated leaflet containing 12-point demands calling for establishing “an exploitation-free society under the leadership of a classless army.”¹²

But the political perspective of the army as an institution was fully developed by Ershad as the army chief in the days ahead of the March 1982 *coup* by him. In an interview to foreign press he demanded that the military be accorded a constitutional role to ensure the protection of the political system.¹³ In an article he wrote, “I will reassert my proposition that the role of the military, especially in the context of the national army, should very much be that of a participant in the collective effort of the nation ...”¹⁴ In a booklet he challenged the obsolete concept of the army as an exclusive institution meant only for securing the country from external aggression. As he argued, a cohesive and disciplined institution like the army could and should play an effective role in bringing about political stability and economic development.¹⁵ It, however, remains open to question whether Ershad represented himself or his institution in making such comments.

IV

Militarisation of Politics 1975-90

Politicisation of the military is precursor to militarisation of politics. Militarisation of politics takes place when the ruling elite either fails to respond favourably to the institutional aspirations of the military or threatens their corporate interests through policies or policy interventions. As in the case of politicization, militarisation is also an indicator of dysfunctional CMR. By militarizing politics the military elite places themselves in the decision-making process whereby they make the state machinery respond to the corporate interest of the military. But in politics the military finds itself in the delicate role of balancing the military as an institution and the political elite. Experience suggests that such a role is not without strains and stresses. Between 1975 and 1990 Bangladesh went through such phenomena of militarisation of politics.

Between 1975 and 1990 military rule and civilianised military rule presided over the destiny of Bangladesh. During those years two military strongmen Ziaur Rahman (1975-81) and H.M. Ershad (1982-90) were at the helm of affairs. In between, however, there was the interregnum (May 1981-March 1982) following the assassination of president Zia during which Vice President Justice Sattar first officiated as president as per the constitution, and was subsequently elected as president. During the early phase of this interregnum the army under the leadership of Ershad played the required role of standing by the constitution and supporting the acting president. But Ershad effected a *volte-face* as the newly elected president was trying to get settled in his office; Ershad sounded out that the army would need a role in the affairs of the state within the parameters of the constitution. The president, however, did not directly meet such a demand but tried to assuage the heightened army ambition in his own

way. He extended the tenure of the chief of staff from three to four years, raised the defence budget from Tk. 220 crores to Tk 306 crores; and finally, constituted a National Defence Council with representation of the three service chiefs.¹⁶ A pointer to the state of CMR that resulted from such moves was that the army resented the numerical majority of ministers on the National Defence Council, while the political elite considered the move a sell-out to the army. In reality neither side was right in thinking as they did. The anti-army feeling of the political elite and the civil society is the colonial and Pakistani hangover. On the other hand, civilian majority on the defence council was nothing to be resented as civilian preponderance is an accepted norm in democracy. Above all, defence is no longer a simple military matter; it involves coordination of policies and actions between the civil and the military elites of the society.

But before any of the policy interventions by president Sattar could materialize Ershad staged a bloodless *coup* on 24 March 1982, which appeared from the military perspective, both a 'guardian' and 'veto' *coup*. Consequentially, a constitutionally elected president and his administration was dislodged.

While in power Ziaur Rahman was constrained to find out that it was not an easy task to balance the civil-military relations. Faced with the increasingly growing pressure from his bastion of power in the cantonment he moved to enlist a popular support base. As it turned out, the art of balancing these two sources of power became a tricky game of walking a tight rope. Indeed, he had to face as many as seventeen attempted *coups* within the armed forces, which he suppressed with an iron hand.

That he failed in his delicate game was demonstrated on 30 May 1981 when he met his tragic end in what appeared to be a repeat

performance of 15 August 1975 in which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur lay dead.

During the nine-year long rule of Ershad the CMR scenario was similar to that of Zia's. But Ershad went further than Zia in increasing the perks and privileges of the armed forces. By extending Zia's system of inducting army officers into civil and police administration, Ershad established a 10 per cent quota in diplomatic posts and in the posts of secretaries to the governments. Such induction of army personnel into civilian responsibilities reached such an extent that during cabinet meetings at least three senior army officers would be regularly present.¹⁷ This practice, although earned solid support from the cantonment, was considered a threat to the corporate interest of the civil bureaucracy. But this was how Ershad managed support from the military to stay in power longer than his military predecessor. He could have fallen in December 1987 but for the strong support from the military. By the time he had to leave in December 1990 national and international circumstances had undergone such changes as to negate the continuation of military support.

Both during the Zia and Ershad regimes the military gained materially but had to incur the high cost of having its image dented a good deal in the public eye. In such a context, the military withdrawal from power politics in 1990 was widely hailed in the public. It appeared that CMR in Bangladesh was at the threshold of a new and auspicious beginning; and this was mostly because of revival of public trust in the military. Moreover, the occasion appeared to be the one when both the military and the public shared the common goal of serving national interest.

V**Post-1990 CMR in Bangladesh**

Ershad's exit from power and the consequent regeneration of the democratic process coincided with the ending of the Cold War and democratization across most of the Third World. The military withdrawal from politics in Bangladesh was thus coincident with the global change.

The years following the transition of 1990 the success record of political governments on the socio-economic and political fronts has been spotty; but the record in experiencing comparatively better CMR than in the past has been noteworthy. The new CMR stood its litmus test when during the 15 February 1996 general election (boycotted by all the major political parties), despite inducements and provocations both from within and outside, the military did not indulge in political adventures. On the contrary, the military went in aid to the civil authority for recovering illegal arms and also for security back-up on the election day.

But things did go awry for three days from 18 through 20 May 1996 the nation faced aghast the spectre of civil-military and military-military confrontations.¹⁸ The incident was provoked by the then civilian caretaker president, who under his new-found power over defence as per the 13th Amendment to the Constitution fired a couple of high ranking military officers supposedly very close to the Army chief. While taking this decision the president had kept the Caretaker Government and the military in the dark. The reaction of the army was quick and convulsive; and its chief was accused of plotting a *coup*. The resultant confusing and confounding series of events,

however, quietened under the impact of national and international pressure.

The Bangladesh army faced another acid test for its professionalism and non-political role during what has termed the 1/11 episode of 2007. The background of the episode was created by the then questionable and dysfunctional caretaker government; and, coupled with it, was the alarmingly increasing stridency of the political opposition. The country appeared to be at the political *cul-de-sac*, and faced civil war. Under such circumstances, the military, under the leadership of its chief General Moeen U Ahmed, emerged the arbiter. The army as well as the country faced literally three options. First, an army-backed general election as per schedule but without participation by the major political parties. Second, holding of the election under a martial law. Third, continuation of the constitutional rule, buttressed, however, by slapping an emergency for improving the worsened law and order situation.

The first option was totally unacceptable to the political opposition, and the army had to weigh at least three implications *vis-à-vis* this option. First, backing such an election by the army would have made the institution face public wrath. Second, more importantly, there was UN pressure on the army for not aiding such a questionable election; which was backed by a veiled threat that in case the army backing such an election it would disqualify itself for the UN peacekeeping mission, a threat that concerned the corporate financial interest of the army. Third, the army would have its image, rebuilt so painstakingly since the 1990s, severely dented.

The second option did not have any taker even in the army. In the post-Cold War sea-changed scenario martial law is an anathema to the international community; and the army was quite aware of the fact

that martial law in Bangladesh would not be countenanced by the donor countries and bodies.

There was a consensus within the army as to the last option, and the three chiefs made the president accept it and take follow-up action accordingly. This was how the nation was spared an impending political catastrophe, and thus the episode of 1/11 was created. The role of the army in effecting this episode may appear to have approximated a 'guardian' or 'breakthrough' *coup*, albeit with two qualifiers. First, the process was *in camera* between the president and the three service chiefs. Second, the army did not take political power, but backed the improvised and extraordinarily prolonged caretaker government which oversaw a free and fair general election by the end of 2008.

VI

Civil-Military Common Goals and the Building of Better Civil-Military Relations in Bangladesh

That both the civil and the military segments of the society have the outstanding common goal of advancing national interest was abundantly demonstrated when they fought together in the Liberation War. The resultant camaraderie was expected to have spawned an ideal CMR in independent Bangladesh. But as it was, such an expectation mismatched with the unfolding ground-reality as the years wore on. Apportionment of responsibility for the non-fulfillment of the expectation would certainly include both the components of CMR in Bangladesh. Both segments of the society have failed to get over their myopic views about each other. Both have failed to bear in

mind that Bangladesh was born through blood shed by both, and building of the country needed joint endeavours of both; and none should have exclusive interest parameters. In other words, there was to be something like a paradigm shift in the mutual perception in the new country; but, unfortunately, the old hang-overs of mutual negative perception persisted.

The post-1990 scenario, as already suggested, is hopeful. This hope is not only for the three occasions when the military persisted in its professionalism; it is more because of some practical instances of how the interests of civil and military coalesced. A major such instance was the astoundingly successful delivery of the national identity card project by the military preceding the 2008 general election.

Thus the military role and civil perception about it must have undergone some hopeful changes in the recent past. But there remains a good deal to be done to build on such a background. In such a context, the first point to be made is about the structure of the military. The military structure that originates out the colonial tradition make the institution exclusive cutting it off the rest of the society. Thus a world unto themselves members of this institution develop a psyche that, on most occasions, comes at cross purposes with the society at large. During any grave threat or external aggression, however, society-military divide vanishes, but recurs during normal times. The pertinent question, therefore, is: in a sea-changed world how long the military would sustain its identity as a no-changer? There are compulsive reasons to suggest that should not. Already serious endeavours have been undertaken in many countries of the Third World to bring the army closer to the society through necessary regulatory changes. In Senegal, for example, a new military code was

adopted in May 1994 to facilitate civil-military interaction. At a conference in Dakar held by the end of 1996 a 40-member group worked to discuss the role of the military in a democracy. Two cues may be provided as to the proposed structural reformulation of the Bangladesh military. First, there should be a national consensus to make the best use of the army, and not abuse it by any civil or military leaders. Second, in a democratic society the military should also be subject to such norms as transparency and accountability within the framework of civilian oversight.

The pertinent cue for the civil responsibility in bettering the CMR scenario may be derived from the following suggestive words of Huntington: “The tension between the military and society could be lessened if the society adopted a more sympathetic understanding and appreciation of the military viewpoint and military need.”¹⁹

Such an understanding and appreciation presuppose mutual trust building. Some recommendations may be made for the facilitation of such trust building. Our educational curricula should have discussion on the Bangladesh army in the same way as different organs of government and national institutions are introduced. Media should be given full access to the military matters excepting, however, the classified ones. Military personnel, with requisite background and expertise, should be allowed to write on the military matters in the media. These are some of the ways how an informed public could be groomed.

Finally, for building a bridge of mutual trust both the civil and military need to interact with each other according to relevant democratic norms; and the basis of which is, as the US General Colin Powell once remarked, “The military must serve the people, not the other way round.” But it must also be added that the people are to

know how to get the service of the military; and this is a job to be done by the political elite.

Concluding Remarks

Three conclusions emerge out of this discussion. First, it is revealed that over the four decades Bangladesh has had both the worst and hopeful times in CMR, and the responsibility for which devolves on both the civil and the military segments of the society. Second, it is pertinent to mention that no successful *coup* in Bangladesh took place without overt and sometimes covert support of motivated political elements. Third, burying the past CMR in Bangladesh needs to be forward-looking and the necessary changes of mindset involving both sides are in order to keep pace with the fast changing times.

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