

Do we need an NSC?

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THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL (NSC) bill is soon to be presented in Parliament and is coming in for a fair amount of flak not only from the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) but also the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) which had earlier agreed not to oppose it as part of its deal with the government on the Legal Framework Order (LFO). Some would argue that this is what the times demand: [coordination between the military and the civilian leadership in an apex institutional setting in order to move away from the recurring pattern of military takeovers in Pakistan's history.] Far better it is argued that the military be given a constitutional role in the country's governance than leave the nation open to arbitrary takeovers and the frequent interruption of the political process and the negative consequences flowing from it. President Pervez Musharraf has in a similar vein argued that it is better to have the army 'in' than keep it 'out.' The NSC, as proposed, also fits into a model of minimal power sharing favoured by the army.

As matters stand, the army, through President Musharraf, retains the chairmanship of the NSC. The Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff committee (CJSC) and the chiefs of army, air force and navy will be the other members from the military's side. The prime minister, chairman of the Senate, the National Assembly Speaker, Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly and the four provincial chief ministers will constitute the civilian members. According to press reports, the proposed law seeks to establish an NSC to serve as a

forum for consultation on matters of national security, including the sovereignty, integrity, defence, security of the state, crisis management, democracy, governance and inter-provincial harmony.

Clearly, the sheer scope of what the NSC would regard as being of legitimate concern to it is indicative of its central role in governance. Is it better that this is so, rather than power being arbitrarily exercised by an army chief who decides to take over? The answer: not necessarily.

It is one thing to accept an aberration in the process because circumstances so demand or that the exigencies of power so dictate. But an aberration remains just that, no matter how frequently it occurs. And it must continue to be seen that way, if for no other reason than to serve as a constant reminder of the need for moving towards the principle of civilian supremacy and creating the legal and institutional framework that will eventually ensure that outcome. Although the NSC is envisaged as an advisory body, the status of its constituent members will obviously make its recommendations difficult to ignore.

It is not just the NSC itself, but the thinking the proposed bill represents. When the army seeks to institutionalise its role in governance it posits a number of propositions in support of its position: the corruption and incompetence of civilian leadership, the army's ability to safeguard the national interest, its capacity to run systems and organisations more efficiently and so on. These are debatable assertions and what the army needs to accept is that even the task of addressing security concerns,

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in charge. In 1965, under General Ayub Khan we failed to secure our objectives vis-à-vis Kashmir and had to sue for peace within days of India's attack across the international border. In 1971, General Yahya Khan and the coterie around him were obviously far removed from the reality on the ground as they pushed Pakistan relentlessly towards its darkest hour. It was under General Zia-ul Haq in 1984 that the Indians were able to advance to the forward positions on Siachin.

To say, as is often done, that those at the helm were misled or manipulated by civilians or politicians is inadequate defence, much as ignorance of the law is no excuse. And, regardless of who was in office, formally, the policies on Afghanistan and Kashmir have been strongly influenced by the army. The U-turns or the re-think carried out by the Musharraf regime on Afghanistan, Kashmir and the nuclear issue are a sufficient indictment of the policies that were pursued earlier by those in uniform. Yet, not too far back, any criticism of these very policies brought forth charges of betrayal and 'security-risk,' if not complicity.

On Thursday, President Pervez Musharraf responding to concerns over the NSC observed that the proposed Council was no threat to democratic institutions: 'Balance of authority would remain intact after the establishment of the NSC.' After the 1971 war the military had supported a different kind of civil-military balance, indicated in the White Paper on Defense Organization. "It is only a representative government and the exertion by the Government of supreme authority over the country's

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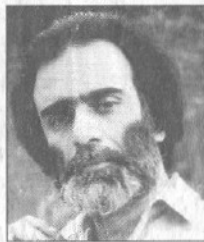
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Defense Establishment that ends the separation of the Armed Forces from the people and eliminates the elements of caprice from decisions of war or peace...National defense policy is no longer a military affair alone...the evolution of national defense policy and its administration requires (a) effective political control at the top... and (b) a number of institutions and agencies at the base, to produce the necessary data and appreciation on which political decisions can be based." [Cohen, 1998]

President Musharraf deserves credit for a number of positive steps since his assumption of power even if in many cases he is redressing wrongs for which it is not the politicians or the civil bureaucracy that can be held responsible. More importantly, he needs to see the dispensation over which he has presided as a kind of 'emergency' interregnum rather than the basis of a long-term arrangement that the NSC proposal suggests. If macroeconomic stability is to be taken into the next phase or the fight against extremism to be successfully conducted, space will have to be provided for mainstream political forces to play their role.

Short of that we may well be witness to the pattern familiar in Pakistan's history of military intervention, consolidation, over-extension and collapse. Given the complex situation emerging in our region and beyond, we simply cannot afford a re-run of this dismal scenario.

Abbas Rashid is a freelance journalist and political analyst whose career has included editorial positions in various Pakistani newspapers