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Commentary

The Military in Guyana: Political and Institutional Adaptations

Ivelaw L. Griffith

The chapter by Dion Phillips on the military in Guyana is essentially about adaptation—by the political elites who have ruled the country since its independence from British rule in the mid-1960s, and by the military and other security institutions over which the elites exercised power and influence. It is a fine treatment of structural, policy, and operational aspects of the military and the context in which it has existed. Moreover, it points to many of the challenges security institutions in Guyana have faced, the choices made for them by political elites and by their own directorates, and some of the political and economic changes that influenced the challenge and choice dynamics.

Yet, there has been a certain constant element in Guyana's civil-military landscape: for all the power and influence of the military and other security outfits, the fundamental character of civil-military relations has been non-praetorian. The Guyana landscape manifested varying degrees of "penetration," a circumstance identified by Eric Nordlinger in the classic Soldiers in Politics as where civilian rulers obtain loyalty and obedience by penetrating the military with political ideas and personnel. Thus, whereas in other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America the transformation of civil-military landscapes has focused on the twin demands for "disengagement" and "democratization" occasioned by praetorianism, in Guyana it has been more appropriate to focus on "depoliticization" and "democratization," with the requisite initiatives coming from the political elites rather than the military elites.

Although Phillips does not address the issue directly, his assessment points to a contextual lacuna for the operation of the military: there is no credible existing national security policy and strategy to guide overall military and national security conduct. As he explains, there are constitutional and legislative parameters for the military to work in. True also there exists an architecture within which operational policy decisions are taken. However, this writer suggests that while these are necessary, they are not sufficient.

Especially as Guyana faces credible external and internal threats, the absence of an overall policy framework to guide both the political and administrative elites concerned with security and the military institutions themselves is a glaring void that almost guarantees "muddling through," especially in times of crisis. The recent military, political, and foreign policy actions by Venezuela and Suriname, notably between 1998 and 2001, dramatize the need for this lacuna to be addressed by the political elites in Guyana as a matter of urgency.

The first phase of such an effort was held in April 2000 in Georgetown, with the aid of the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, which is based in Washington, DC, at a consultation that brought together several military, political, economic, and civil society actors. This writer views the enterprise as being about process as well as product. The consultation and analysis were not intended to be ends in themselves; they were aimed at delivering a national security policy document and a corresponding strategy. For several political and administrative reasons, this aim is yet to be achieved, though. Thus, some considerations of future conduct in relation to national security policymaking process and product might be useful.

Process and product are linked, and they are equally important. Moreover, there is a symbiotic relationship between them in that the process will influence both the quality of the product and its acceptability. Thus, rather than address process and product separately, it might be more productive to deal with their combined dynamics in relation to two areas: confidence building and follow through.

Confidence building

Any national security consultation of this kind is an exercise in confidence building, as it facilitates the development of and can allow

for the sustaining of trust and confidence by several key national actors. The confidence building potential goes beyond the security domain; it extends to the political domain generally. Participants in this enterprise should, therefore, use the social bonding, mutual respect, appreciation of differing perspectives, and willingness to discuss and disagree in a civil manner manifested at the initial consultation as a model for future conduct in other areas.

Security confidence building is both a concept and a desired outcome. It is viewed as having both conceptual and practical utility in peace making and peace building within, between, and among nations.¹ Confidence building has several important tenets. Two of them worthy of attention here, given space limitations, are transparency and communication. These are mutually reinforcing and supportive. Hence, remarks about their applicability to national security consultation should address their synergistic relevance rather than their relevance separately.

Several observations are warranted. First, while mindful of confidentiality, the actors involved should be cognizant of the need to provide information to the stakeholders in the enterprise and to constituencies that are crucial to the success of process and product. The provision of information is necessary in order to avoid or squelch rumors and to prevent misunderstanding and misperception of intent or desired outcome of the process or product. Misperception can affect both process and product. It can undermine the confidence of stakeholders in the process and detract from the willingness of the suspicious stakeholders, or of others, to accept the results.

Avoiding misperception is crucial because decision makers—in the political, security, economic, and other spheres—make decisions based on their perception of reality and not necessarily on actual reality. The observation made over three decades ago by a well known international affairs scholar still holds true: “We must recognize that the people whose decisions determine the policies and actions of nations do not respond to

1 For a discussion on security confidence building, see Ashton B. Carter, William J. Perry, and John D. Steinbruner, *A New Concept of Cooperative Security* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1992); *New Concept of Security in the Hemisphere*, OEA/Ser.K/XXIX, SEGRE/doc.6/94, 28 February 1994; and Ivelaw L. Griffith, “Security Collaboration and Confidence Building in the Americas,” in Jorge I. Domínguez, ed., *International Security and Democracy: Latin America and the Caribbean in the Post-Cold War Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

the 'objective' facts of the situation, whatever that may mean, but to their 'image' of the situation. It is what we think the world is like, and not what it is really like, that determines our behavior."²

Second, the actors need to be mindful of the relevant stakeholders and constituencies involved and make pertinent information available to them during the process; the information should be about both the process and the intended product, and should be provided in appropriate quantities and formats. Quite important, the stakeholders and the constituencies are not necessarily one and the same set of actors. Thus, it might be useful to identify the constituencies likely to have direct (or tangential) interest in the policy and strategy.

There are several relevant constituencies:

- Executive branch actors. Key in this area are the President (who is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and Chairman of the Defense Board), the Head of the Presidential Secretariat (who also is Secretary to the Cabinet, Secretary to the Defense Board, Secretary to the National Anti Narcotics Committee, and Coordinator of the Central Intelligence Committee), the Minister of Home Affairs, the Chief of Staff of the Guyana Defense Force, and the Commissioner of Police. However, also important are the entire Cabinet and all Presidential Advisers.
- Members of Parliament (MP). Two observations are noteworthy here. First, the Parliamentary involvement should not be restricted to Parliamentarians of the ruling party; all MPs should be informed of developments. As regards the ruling party, the tendency has been in Guyana (and elsewhere in the Caribbean) to limit information on "important" issues to the party's "movers and shakers." This also has been true of other parties represented in Parliaments. Although it often is necessary to disseminate sensitive information on a "need to know" basis, information about the national security policymaking enterprise's process and product should be provided to all MPs. It is left to the prudent judgment of the managers of the enterprise to determine the quantity and timing of the information to be made available.

2 Kenneth Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," in James N. Rosenau, ed., *International Politics and Foreign Policy* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 423. The emphasis on the last sentence is mine.

Second, the inclusion of all MPs in the process could be helpful in at least two ways. One, at the time of legislative adoption it would reduce the possibility that opposition MPs would dispute the need for the product or reject what it entails, as they would feel part of the overall enterprise. Two, this inclusive approach would enable all MPs to (a) help explain the product to their respective political constituencies, and (b) be more informed parliamentary actors and not just pliant instruments of their respective party leaders.

- The media.
- Civil society, including political parties, labor unions, religious organizations, the business community, and academia.
- John and Jane Public; the “man and woman in the street.”
- The diplomatic community in Georgetown.
- Guyana’s diplomatic corps abroad.

The importance of the last two constituencies should not be underestimated. It stands to reason that the states with such direct interest in Guyana that they deem it necessary to maintain a diplomatic presence in Georgetown would definitely be interested in the country’s national security policymaking enterprise. This is especially so for the states contiguous to Guyana and the ones with which there are territorial disputes (which do not constitute one and the same group.)

The absence of information could lead to rumors and suspicions, and consequent diplomatic, military, or economic actions that could be either inimical to the interests of Guyana generally or harmful to its security policy enterprise specifically. The observation by Kenneth Boulding that was noted earlier is relevant here as well. As to the diplomatic corps abroad, they should be able to explain developments not only to representatives of countries and international organizations with direct and tangential interest in Guyana, but also to Guyanese in the Diaspora.

Follow through

Guyana and other Caribbean (and some Latin American) countries face a central management reality: timely and efficient progress from policy/project initiation to policy/project completion is more the exception

than the rule. Although this is found in both the private and public sectors, for a variety of reasons, including resource limitations, competing demands, arcane regulations, the vicissitudes of domestic (and sometimes international) politics, and administrative lethargy, it is almost a defining feature of the public sector in Guyana and elsewhere. The managers of the security policymaking enterprise should guard against the process and product becoming victims of this.

In this respect, the elites involved should:

- Determine the relative importance of the enterprise and give it the commensurate attention and resources.
- Keep the enterprise practical, remembering always the political and economic contexts, both national and international.
- Rise above partisanship. The ruling party will necessarily have a vested interest in the management of the process and of its outcome. However, the entire enterprise risks foundering should there be attempts to make it a tool of any single party's interest(s). Rising above partisanship will not necessarily be easy in times of impending national and sub-national elections, but every effort should be made to avoid subordinating the process and the product to short term political expediency.
- Keep the management of the process small, but representative; not a one-man or one-woman show, but sizeable enough to reflect inclusiveness while not impeding the maintenance of momentum and efficiency.
- Do not talk the enterprise to death. Be mindful that the facility with language of some participants could result in the enterprise becoming intentionally or unintentionally mired in debate and histrionics, sometimes over the definition of terms, with the result that rancor develops and undermines the willingness of stakeholders to continue the process. The outcome could, consequently, be affected, as all the relevant stakeholders may not accept the product.

Implicit in the adaptation portrait of challenge, choice, and change painted by Phillips is the assumption that the political and military elites in Guyana face a fairly difficult task in the quest to fill the existing national security policy void. For what ever consolation it is worth, the elites

there should know that national security policy making is never easy. As Barry Buzan correctly notes, "The making of national security policy requires choices about both the objectives of policy (ends), and the techniques, resources, instruments, and actions, which will be used to implement it (means). Even if one assumes that neither political nor perceptual problems interfere with the process, these choices are not straightforward."³

3 Barry Buzan, People, States, and Fear (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1991), p. 330.

