

## OPINION

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Challenges of corruption

Many facts of the “Rafale scandal” are yet to come out and it is entirely plausible that the full picture will never be known. It is also impossible to predict right now what, if any, political fallout the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) suffer. However, regardless of whether the allegations are true or false, they will end up impairing India’s national security.

As many have pointed out, future governments, afraid of getting embroiled in another scandal, will be more cautious and slow when approving new defence purchases, thus ensuring that the military is saddled with obsolete equipment. The most effective way to ensure that scandals don’t obstruct national defence is transparency. Unfortunately, successive governments have shied away from this solution repeatedly. The all-pervasive governmental obsession with secrecy and close-door decision-making, best characterized by the current administration, has effectively blocked any path to meaningful defence acquisition reforms.

From the “Jeep scandal” of 1948 to the “Bofors scam” of the late 1980s, defence acquisitions have always been one of the most toxic aspects of Indian politics. Aware of this uncomfortable fact, governments have tried to shield themselves from corruption allegations by making the defence acquisition process slow, cumbersome and bureaucratic. A wait time of 10-15 years for acquiring weapons has become common. And given how the current scandal has shaped up, many in the government will likely conclude that the solution lies in waiting even longer in the future.

It is tragic because the obvious solution to preventing future defence scandals lies not in more bureaucratic checks but in simple transparency. This is how many countries have ensured that their national security isn’t regularly held hostage by politics. Several common sense practices can be implemented like clear articulation of defence requirements, publication of white papers and reports, debates in parliamentary committees, involvement of outside experts, and greater media access. Thus, the government can check corruption and maintain the credibility of defence deals so as to withstand bogus allegations.

However, to implement such a culture would require a deeper reform of India’s defence establishment. It would require the government to open up about national security itself. Any public discussion about defence purchases would necessarily have to begin with a discussion on the government’s thinking on security, a topic on which it has been tight-lipped for decades. Successive governments have rarely bothered to officially explain their threat perception or the rationale behind their security policies.

This is not new. Even Jawaharlal Nehru did not openly discuss the reasoning behind some of his most important security policies, like the Kashmir issue or India-China border dispute. Since then, the penchant for secrecy has steadily amplified. Until the 1970s, the government still felt it necessary to provide a public explanation for major security decisions; by the next decade, even this perceived necessity started disappearing. Before the 1971 war, Indira Gandhi spoke to the press often, preparing the country for the war and explaining the government’s concerns. In the late 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi rarely held public discussions to explain the logic behind India’s three-year intervention in Sri Lanka. Since the 1990s, the Indian public has been kept so ignorant that even well-informed citizens today can’t concisely explain the government’s long-term goals on major security issues.

Remarkably, this tendency to conceal the strategic logic holds true within the government as

well. Since the 1970s, security decision-making was increasingly centered in the prime minister's office and the group making these decisions kept growing smaller. By the late 1980s, even senior officials like the army chiefs or defence ministers were sometimes being kept out of the loop. This secrecy culture has pervaded the lower levels of government as well. Several recent security crises—from the Kargil war to the Doklam standoff—have shown that various arms of the government are not in sync even on the most fundamental issues.

Arguably, the previous two governments tried to correct this trend by holding candid public discussions and making the internal decision-making process more inclusive. Under both governments, new institutions were created, crucial documents were declassified, policy statements were made public and semi-official discussions were held. However, these steps were half-measures at best. In any case, the correction has since been reversed by the Narendra Modi government, which puts a premium on close-door decisions. Today, there are likely to be only a handful of officials who can confidently explain the government's thinking when deciding to carry out surgical strikes, for instance.

As long as this culture of silence persists, regular eruption of "defence scandals" will remain a part of the Indian political life. Wrapped in secrecy, these multi-billion dollar deals will lack credibility in the public eye and thus remain vulnerable to legitimate and illegitimate corruption charges. Worse, this culture of opaqueness is ultimately detrimental to Indian national security. Without the pressure to develop security rationales robust enough to withstand public scrutiny, governments will always be tempted to choose vague, narrow-minded and short-term policies since no one will be looking over their shoulders.

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