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Tri-Services Formation in Port Blair: anchor, guns & wings, October 19, 2017. Source: Twitter/@nsitharaman

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by

Anil Ahuja and Arun Sahgal

Introduction

On August 15, 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had announced a long pending major reform in India's Higher Defence Organisation: the Indian Armed Forces were to have a Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS). In our commentary following this decision¹, we had welcomed this politically bold step and outlined the challenges of situating the CDS in the politico-bureaucratic-military hierarchy in a manner that strengthens national security and tri-Services integration and ensures coordination between the NSA and the CDS, between the CDS and the three Service Chiefs and between the CDS and the Defence Secretary.

On December 24, 2019, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) accorded approval for the creation for the post of CDS, while also outlining the specific role of the CDS within the country's defence establishment. On December 29, 2019, the retiring Army Chief General Bipin Rawat was appointed India's first Chief of Defence Staff.

While these decisions and announcements have been widely welcomed, there are, as can be expected, divergent views regarding the envisaged role of the CDS and the organisational structure around him. For some, the range of responsibilities assigned to CDS have exceeded expectations² and the creation of a new Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence is seen as a right step that will finally result in the integration of the service headquarters with the Ministry of Defence³. There are others who believe that the appointment of the CDS as a Principal Advisor to the Defence Minister only on tri-Service matters is unlikely to provide adequate "teeth" for the incumbent to perform the assigned roles of promoting jointness and integration

¹ DPG Policy Brief, Vol IV, Issue 23. <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/indias-chief-of-defence-staff.html>

² Bharat Shakti. CDS' Role and Responsibilities have Exceeded Expectations'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aZO55jy5Zg&feature=youtu.be>

³ Menon Prakash. "CDS Was Needed. But Modi Govt also Creating Department of Military Affairs is a Bonus". The Print. December 25, 2019. <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-govt-creating-department-of-military-affairs-with-cds-a-big-bonus/340495/>

(operations, logistics, training, communications) in the envisaged timeframe of three years.



General Bipin Rawat, India's first Chief of Defence Staff, December 31, 2019

Source: twitter/ @IAF_MCC

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this policy brief is to analyse the functions of the CDS as manifested in the Government announcement, highlight some of the grey areas that persist and suggest measures to ensure that the first incumbent of this critical post is able to function effectively in his task of synergising the Indian Armed Forces, enhance their combat potential and promote the interests of national security.

Organisational Structure and Assigned Roles

It is pertinent to recall that the Report of the Group of Ministers had, in 2001, recommended the creation of the post of CDS to overcome perceived limitations of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) to provide single point military advice to the Government; resolve substantive inter-service doctrinal, policy, planning and operational issues; and overcome serious lacunae in the defence acquisitions planning, budgeting and procurement process. The CDS, supported by the Vice CDS (VCDS) at the head of the HQ Integrated Defence Staff, was expected to overcome these limitations. The announcement made

by the Prime Minister on August 15, 2019 on the creation of the CDS had also highlighted the need to ensure that all elements of the defence forces “move simultaneously at the same pace”.

The CCS has now approved creation of the post of CDS⁴ in the rank of a four star general. However, instead of placing him at the head of the “HQ Integrated Defence Staff” which has matured over the past two decades, he has been designated as the Secretary of a *yet to be created* Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence. He has also been nominated to be the Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC).

The remit of the DMA is to include the three armed forces with their respective HQs; the Territorial Army; works related to all the services and all revenue expenditure (procurements less capital acquisitions).

While the CDS has been designated as the Principal Military Adviser to the Raksha Mantri (RM), the three service chiefs will continue to advise the RM on matters exclusively concerning their respective services. It has categorically been stated that he will not exercise any military command, including over the three service chiefs. In his role as the “Permanent Chairman COSC”, however, he will “administer” tri-Service organisations and exercise command over the relatively new Cyber and Space Agencies as well as the Special Operations Division. He has also been designated as the Military Adviser to the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA). The Cabinet decision, however, is silent on the CDS administering the tri-Service Andaman and Nicobar Command. In addition, he will be a member, like the other Service Chiefs, of the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) headed by the RM and of the Defence Planning Committee chaired by the NSA.

Being thus situated in the higher defence organisational structure, the CDS has been mandated to bring about optimisation, within “three years”, in the areas of joint operations; communications; training; logistics including transport, repair & maintenance organisations; and utilisation of available infrastructure. He has also been tasked to streamline and implement the entire perspective planning process of capital acquisitions, including Integrated Capability Development Plan (hitherto referred to as the 15 year LTIPP); Defence Capital Acquisition Plan (hitherto referred to as the five-year Services Capital Acquisition Plan/SCAP); and the two-year roll-on Annual Acquisition Plan (AAP). In addition, he has been assigned the task of promoting indigenisation,

⁴ Press Information Bureau, Government of India. Cabinet approves creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff in the rank of four star General. 24 DEC 2019 5:44PM by PIB Delhi

as well as the challenging responsibility of assigning inter-Service prioritisation of Capital acquisition proposals, based on anticipated budgets.

It is visualised that this would enable the armed forces to “implement coordinated defence doctrine”, “foster jointmanship” and “optimise resource utilisation”, with the desired end-state being the establishment of Joint/Theatre Commands over a period of time (possibly, in a three-year timeframe).

Functional Challenges

The Cabinet decision on the role of the CDS is no doubt the result of extensive deliberations based on the recommendations of the Committee headed by the National Security Advisor. Nonetheless, information available in the public domain leaves a number of aspects unclear:

- (a) The rationale for not placing the CDS and the VCDS at the head of the HQ Integrated defence Staff (IDS) and creating a separate Department of Military Affairs (DMA) requires clarification, particularly as the DMA’s functional role remains undefined.
- (b) What is the proposed organisational structure of the DMA and how does this relate to the HQ IDS?
- (c) With the three Service Chiefs continuing to have the organisational support of and command authority over their respective Services, as well as access to the national leadership and an equal place (voice) in important committees like the DPC and DAC, from where will the CDS derive his power to implement the “breakthrough” reforms that he is expected to bring about, which will entail demolishing legacy structures and overcoming entrenched mindsets? Where (and how) does the CDS, as another four-star officer, start ranking *primus inter pares* (first amongst equals), which is a basic imperative for overcoming the *status quo* and delivering the expected results?
- (d) From where will the CDS derive high quality, tri-Service staff advice and support to transform the Indian Armed Forces? The military reforms envisaged by the Cabinet will require the very best military professionals.
- (e) Will the CDS be confined to “Military Affairs”? Who will formulate the National Defence Strategy essential for perspective planning, force structuring and capability development?

- (f) What will be the inter-se relationship between the Department of Defence (DoD) in the MOD and the DMA and, by extension, the relationship between the Defence Secretary and the CDS, who will be heading yet another "Department" in MOD (*akin to the Department of Defence Production, Department of Defence Research and Development, and Department of Ex-Servicemen's Welfare*)? What is the rationale (or benefit) of placing the CDS as head of a new department, at the level of a Secretary, when the parity of Defence Secretary with other Services is at the level of Vice Chiefs? Also, at present, the Defence Secretary, while heading the DoD, ranks *primus inter pares* amongst the Secretaries in MOD and is responsible for all defence related aspects. How is this likely to be reconciled with the CDS now being placed to head the DMA?



Tri-Services Formation in Port Blair: anchor, guns & wings, October 19, 2017. Source: Twitter/@sitharaman

It merits consideration that no major reforms of the armed forces are purely "Military" in nature. Each reform has implications for finance, manpower, equipment, structure of authorised establishment, infrastructure and terms of engagement with other services and ministries. None of the anticipated major reforms can thus be implemented in a "silo" by the CDS heading a DMA. And finally, does the top military adviser, vested with the responsibility of bringing about such sweeping reforms, need to be burdened with bureaucratic responsibilities of running a "department" of the MOD, leaving little time to conceptualise the desired changes and provide strategic guidance to the RM?

Recommendations

Putting the CDS in place after nearly two decades of contemplation is undoubtedly a bold political decision. The well-considered recommendations of the Committee headed by the NSA appear to have considerable merit, even if details are not available in the public domain. We would like to highlight some recommendations which may strengthen the institution of the CDS further.

- (a) The most significant task that needs to be assigned to the CDS is of **“visualising the security environment” and “conceptualising the multi-domain operational scenarios, on and off the conventional battlefield”**. This will provide the basic foundation for the entire gamut of defence and security planning and give a sense of direction for force structuring, capability development and budget allocation. Jointness in operations, communications, logistics and infrastructure utilisation; progress towards integrated theatre commands; reforming the acquisition process; and accelerating indigenisation will all emanate from this fundamental process of conceptualisation.
- (b) The office of the CDS should provide for **Politico-Military Convergence at the national level**. Well considered professional inputs for national security, emanating from the armed forces, should get fed upwards into national policy making on the one hand, while on the other, the political guidance of the national security strategy percolates downwards to the Services through the CDS.
- (c) A concerted effort needs to be made by the political leadership and the Services alike to effectively **make the four-star CDS rank as primus inter pares**. This should be clearly signalled by his positioning with other defence and security structures, such as the Defence Planning Committee.
- (d) The CDS will be as effective as the support structures that are made available to him in form of advisers, staff and secretariat. **He will require the finest military and civilian minds and an efficiently functioning DMA**. The HQ IDS is already appropriately organised, with verticals for Policy Planning & Force Development, Joint Operations, Joint Intelligence, Training and Doctrine; appropriately staffed to address issues related to acquisitions, financial planning, budgetary management and steering international defence cooperation; designed to have an interface with DRDO, DG

Acquisition and the Department of Defence Production; and is already exercising control over the tri-Service Command/agencies and training institutions. Building DMA over this available structure would provide an inherent advantage to the CDS. Operationalisation of the National Defence University, under the control of the CDS, would provide him with further valuable insights into reforming the armed forces.

- (e) **Effective implementation of the entire acquisitions process and according inter-Service prioritisation based on budget allocations (or conversely, recommending defence budget allocations according to operational needs) is a huge challenge** which has perennially confronted the Indian defence establishment. The current arrangement of Capital acquisitions remaining beyond the ambit of the CDS, with the DG Acquisition continuing to function as part of the DoD and with Defence Finance still remaining independent of both, is likely to present a formidable challenge to the CDS. A functional synergy needs to be created within these existing structures, under the advice of the CDS.

Finally, the CDS, as distinct from a field level operational military commander, must carry along the three services and the entire defence and security establishment, civil as well as military. This will always be somewhat of a challenge if the CDS has been the Chief of a particular service before assuming this appointment. Likewise, the nation needs to repose the utmost faith and confidence in the incumbent, reassuring itself of the loyalty that the armed forces of India have invariably displayed towards civilian control and respect for the democratic process.

There are high expectations from the CDS. Effective functioning of this long awaited post will to a considerable extent depend on the manner in which its first incumbent will exercise his professional responsibilities.



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