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India's Chief of Defence Staff

Authors

Anil Ahuja

Arun Sahgal

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Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

www.delhipolicygroup.org



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ABOUT US

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In keeping with India's increasing global profile as a leading power and the accompanying dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the Delhi Policy Group has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role; India's initiatives to strengthen its strategic periphery; India's political, security and connectivity challenges and policies across the Indo-Pacific; and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise. To support these goals, the DPG undertakes research, publishes policy reports and organises conferences on strategic and geo-political, geo-economic, and defence and security issues.

Authors

Lieutenant General Anil Ahuja (Retd.), Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group
Brig. Arun Sahgal (Retd.), Ph.D., Senior Fellow, Delhi Policy Group

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviews the tri-services guard of honour at Kochi in 2015, Source: The Hindu South Block, Source: Delhi Tourism

Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh along with three Services Chiefs pays homage to the martyrs at National War Memorial ahead of taking charge as Defence Minister in New Delhi, June 1, 2019, Source: The New Indian Express

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India's Chief of Defence Staff

by

Anil Ahuja and Arun Sahgal

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on August 15, 2019 that the Indian Armed Forces will have a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) has captured headlines and the interest of the uniformed fraternity and defence analysts alike. This long delayed decision on higher defence reforms, has generated media comment about the duties of CDS and his place in the existing defence hierarchy. Suggestions have ranged from the simultaneous creation of Theatre Commands under the CDS with the Service Chiefs assuming a Staff role, akin to the US system; placing Strategic Forces Command, the Andaman and Nicobar Command, Cyber and Space Agencies and Special Operations Division directly under the CDS; and the CDS as the point person for single point military advice to the government. Perceptions also abound regarding the CDS's likely status and relationship with the senior bureaucracy and the Service Chiefs. Some opine that the CDS be made all powerful, taking over some roles presently being performed by the NSA, in addition to heading integrated theatre commands. Each of these suggestions comes with its own rationale for making India's armed forces a potent and synergised fighting machine. However, this overall optimism, is dampened in some measure by cynics who are resigned to the idea that this would be a mere ceremonial post with 'no teeth'. The challenge before us remains of making the CDS decision work in most effective manner.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviews the tri-services guard of honour at Kochi in 2015, Source: The Hindu

This Policy Brief suggests a framework for situating the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in the Higher Defence Organisation and National Security Structure of India, in a manner that this politically bold decision results in strengthening national security and tri-Services integration.

Background

The Report of the Group of Ministers (GOM) on National Security constituted on the basis of the Kargil Review Committee Report recommended the creation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff in 2001. This was to overcome “serious weaknesses in the ability of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) to provide single point military advice to the government and to resolve substantive inter-service doctrinal, planning, policy and operational issues adequately” (Para 6.5 of GOM Report). It was also aimed at “overcoming the lacunae in the defence acquisition process due to lack of integrated planning, weakness in linkage between plans and budget and due to the absence of a dedicated, professionally equipped procurement structure within the Ministry of Defence (MOD)” (Para 6.6 of GOM Report).



South Block, Source: Delhi Tourism

The GOM had recommended creation of a CDS and a VCDS (Vice Chief of Defence Staff) to provide single point military advice to the government; to administer (as distinct from operational control) Strategic Forces; to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of planning process through intra and inter-service (acquisition) prioritisation; and to ensure required ‘jointness’ between the three services. In 2012, the Naresh Chandra Task Force reiterated the requirement of a tri-Service head, though with a variation i.e., appointing a Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) instead of the CDS. All these recommendations, however, have remained *in abeyance* till the recent announcement by the Prime Minister.

The reasons for this hiatus have included the lack of political consensus, with none of the national level political parties responding to the call for implementing recommendations on the subject. It was speculated that this reluctance was on account of ill-founded hesitation over creating too strong a military office in India's democratic set-up, particularly in a neighbourhood of nations where militaries are *not so well integrated* in their 'democratic' policies. This hesitation was further reinforced by bureaucratic reluctance and apprehensions over upsetting civil-military equations. Response of the Services themselves was equally strident, with apprehensions of domination by one service (primarily the Army) over others; suspicions regarding soundness and objectivity of 'single point' military advice; reluctance towards creation of theatre commands; apprehensions regarding the status of Service Chiefs etc. Although the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff was created in 2001, there was absolutely no urgency amongst either the three Services, the MOD or the national leadership to bring about tri-Services integration. The nation has paid dearly for this procrastination, resulting in persisting shortages of weapons and equipment (despite India being the largest global importer of defence equipment), the near absence of 'jointness & integration' and inability to evolve concepts and doctrines for the multi-domain warfare of the 21st Century.

Implementing the CDS decision

With the political decision to appoint a CDS now in place, it would be appropriate to 'situate' the post appropriately in the matrix of politico-bureaucratic-military hierarchy and to examine the proposed charter of responsibilities.

In consonance with the recommendations of the GOM report, the CDS should be a Four-Star officer, ranking *primus inter pares* (*first amongst equals*) with the Service Chiefs. His appointment would fill a long standing void at the head of HQ IDS. This HQ, having matured considerably over the last two decades, is in a position to provide the CDS with a platform to become fully functional, at par with the Service Chiefs, overcoming a serious handicap with which the CISC presently functions. It would bring great credibility to this appointment if the incumbent is identified through a process of deep selection from amongst eligible Three-Star, C-in-C level officers of the three services, with substantial tri-Service experience. The officer once selected should enjoy a three-year fixed tenure and a higher age of retirement than the Service Chiefs, providing continuity. Feasibility of conducting the selection through 'hearings' by a select Parliamentary panel can be examined, to instil confidence amongst service personnel and citizens alike about the professional competence and stature of the incumbent.

The relationship between the CDS and the Defence Secretary has been covered quite comprehensively in the report of the GOM (Para 6.26 and 6.27). The report states that while the CDS would be the 'Principal Military Adviser', the Defence Secretary would be the 'Principal Defence Adviser' to the *Raksha Mantri* (RM), coordinating functioning of all departments within the ministry and being accountable to the Parliament for expenditure of all Public money allotted to the MOD. However, the overall responsibility for the defence should rest with the RM. Thus, while the CDS, like the Service Chiefs, would have a higher status than the Defence Secretary in the warrant of precedence, they would both be heads of respective military and civilian verticals, providing independent channels of advice to the RM on respective subjects. The functional interface of HQ IDS with the Defence Secretary would be through the Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS), the present CISC, quite like the present services interface through their Vice Chiefs.

It would be beneficial for management of National Security related issues if the functioning of the recently constituted Defence Planning Committee (DPC) is delegated largely to the CDS. While the NSA brings the political guidance of the PMO to the table, the CDS could functionally steer this body, ensuring implementation of decisions and coordination. With a senior defence functionary now available to steer this committee, under political guidance, it may also be possible to expand its scope and include elements of the Ministry of Home Affairs engaged in border and internal security, where they function alongside the armed forces. It would thus be appropriate that the CDS is formally designated as Co- Chair or senior member of the DPC, with the three Service Chiefs being 'permanent invitees'. The VCDS (present CISC) should continue to remain the Member Secretary to ensure commitment of HQ IDS in follow-up action. On the civilian side, implementation of DPC decisions in MOD would be ensured by the Defence Secretary.

The CDS would also need to be placed in other security structures so that there is seamless coordination across verticals vested with the responsibility of building India's Comprehensive National Power (CNP). He should be a member of the inter-ministerial 'Strategic Policy Group' whose functioning is coordinated by the Cabinet Secretary and which, since late 2018, is chaired by the NSA. He must also be included in the Executive Council of the Nuclear Command Authority, Chaired by the NSA. Inclusion in the Political Council also merits consideration. The CDS would thus be able to participate in the execution of decisions of the Council, through the C-in-C of the Strategic Forces Command.

An institutional interface also needs to be established between the office of the CDS and the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) since a coordinated functioning between HQ IDS, NSCS and the DPC will bring synergy in formulating and implementing the National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy. A close functional relationship between the NSA and the CDS would greatly benefit national security.

Internally, within the MOD, the most significant contribution of the CDS would be in the formulation of capability development plans for the armed forces and in implementing the acquisitions process through the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) and its feeder committees [Defence Procurement Board (DPB), Services Capital Acquisition Categorization Committee (SCAPCC) and the Services Capital Acquisition Categorization Higher Committee (SCAPCHC)]. The CDS would be able to oversee formulation of the overall National Defence Strategy and `enforce' intra-service and inter-service prioritisation for acquisitions. HQ IDS, with organisational structure already available for acquisitions and financial planning under one of its Deputy Chiefs, is best suited to align operationally prioritised acquisitions to the allocated Capital budget, which may now be allotted through the CDS. This recommendation comes with the past experience of the methodology adopted by former Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, who enforced intra-service prioritisation through HQ IDS.



Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh along with three Services Chiefs pays homage to the martyrs at National War Memorial ahead of taking charge as Defence Minister in New Delhi, June 1, 2019, Source: The New Indian Express

It also merits consideration that the Director General Acquisition in the Department of Defence, who presently functions under the Defence Secretary, is brought under the CDS, to provide a vital link between the military vertical and the MOD. He would be supported in his acquisition-related technical duties by vetting of acquisition proposals by his HQ IDS service colleagues at the SCAPCC and SCAPCC. Concurrently, DG Acquisition would have the freedom of providing inputs at the Defence Procurement Board (DPB), headed by the Defence Secretary and at the DAC. Finally, the DAC approved proposals will be progressed jointly by the DG Acquisition and the military staff of the CDS, since they would both have 'ownership' of these projects.

Amongst the other significant responsibilities that can be assigned to the CDS are:

- a. Exercise operational and administrative command over the ANC (Andaman and Nicobar Command); Cyber and Space Agencies (or Commands, as and when they come up) and Special Operations Division.
- b. Exercise 'administrative control' over the Strategic Forces Command (SFC), whose 'operational control' rests with the highest political authority.
- c. Support formulation of National Security Strategy by the NSCS.
- d. Responsibility for formulation of National Defence Strategy, Defence Planning Guidelines, Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive.
- e. Scenario building for future operational contingencies, to guide capability development plans.
- f. Formulation of Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP), Services Capital Acquisition Plan (5 or 7 years, as directed) and Technology Perspective and Capability Road Map (TPCR).
- g. Creating an interface with DRDO for formulation of their Long Term Technology Perspective Plan (LTTPP).
- h. Directing conduct of 'technology scan' of various weapon systems available or to be developed.
- i. Directing conduct of strategic assessments for acquisition of major weapon systems and for developing international defence cooperation.
- j. Overseeing and approving intra-service and inter-service prioritisation for acquisitions and aligning these to the Defence Budget, with impediments to be addressed through the DPC.
- k. Evolving joint operations and joint training doctrines.
- l. Responsibility for establishment and functioning of the National Defence University, all tri-Service Category A training institutions, policy planning and conduct of foreign language training.

- m. Planning Out of Area Contingencies (OOAC) with the three services and conduct of appropriate joint exercises.
- n. Building of capabilities for International HADR assistance.
- o. Creation of tri-Service logistic infrastructure and procedures.
- p. Tri-Service equipment codification and standardisation.
- q. Supporting innovation and R&D at DRDO and in private industry.
- r. Development of an indigenous defence industrial base.

Treading with Caution

A significant aspect to be taken note of is that at this initial stage, the emphasis would be more on 'single point control' over capability development and 'single point coordination' between the services for formulation of strategies, concepts, and doctrines. Capability development advice of course would undergo scrutiny of the DAC, with the presence of all stakeholders. Single point operational advice is still some distance away, since the potential incumbents for the CDS post have not really grown through an integrated tri-Service system. The Service Chiefs would need to step forth and support the CDS, to enable a 'single voice articulation' of military advice.

A widely held view prevails that the appointment of the CDS must be concurrent with the creation of integrated, tri-Service, Theatre Commands and that he should exercise operational command over them. This recommendation and the proposition of consolidating 17 Service-specific commands (ostensibly with huge financial savings), will be difficult to implement. Tri-Service commands entail having commanders and staff with reasonable understanding of operational planning, weapons and equipment management, operational logistics, doctrine and training aspects, and personnel policies of all three services. This comes through 'growing with sister services' over the years, cross-postings, institutional and hands-on training. Unfortunately, India has not yet accumulated this type of professional experience. The related perspective that with the CDS and Joint Operational Commands in place, the Chiefs should be assigned a 'Staff role', will be a 'sure killer' of the idea of integration. It would thus be prudent to keep the exercise of creation of a CDS independent of the idea of raising theatre commands.

Conclusion

It is after a gestation period of nearly two decades that the decision to appoint a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) for the Indian armed forces has been taken. This entails putting aside all reservations and apprehensions that different constituencies may have nursed. Successful implementation calls for utmost understanding and coordination between the NSA and the CDS, between the

CDS and the Service Chiefs and between the CDS and the Defence Secretary. Once the CDS becomes a reality, the system will mature progressively, with initial emphasis on synergised capability development, prioritisation and capital budget optimisation. Single point operational advice may be some distance away, as future incumbents of the CDS post rise through tri-Service organisations. These present limitations notwithstanding, creation of a CDS is amongst the most significant reforms announced by the Prime Minister, and one that must be implemented successfully.



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India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

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