

## **A New Chief of Defence Staff Post in India: Ensuring Greater Security Coordination**

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### **Summary**

*The Indian government has formally announced the creation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). This appointment had been recommended by many committees, the most significant of which was the one after the Kargil operations against Pakistan. The CDS is expected to provide a single point of advice to the government on all tri-service matters and serve as the permanent chairman of the chiefs of staff committee. He will also head the Department of Military Affairs in the Ministry of Defence. The appointment is expected to provide synergy in the functioning of the three services and bring about better coordination in training and other capital acquisition plans.*

### **Introduction**

In a move to create a more streamlined system of reporting and decision-making in the Armed Forces, the Indian government has decided to create the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Such an appointment was recommended by various committees and has been under consideration for quite some time. The CDS will serve as the principal military adviser to the Defence Minister on all tri-service matters and will head a new Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The objective is to establish a single, unified chain of command to make the working of the three forces seamless, and provide synergy and integration for an effective strategic alignment. The DMA is expected to cut the red tape and bureaucratic bottleneck that often cause delays on decisions on military reforms and critical procurement. The department will have a mix of officers from the three services and civilians working together. The CDS will be a four-star general viz not be of a rank higher than the present chiefs of the three services. He will be first among equals and a four-star officer (like the three service chiefs) and will be placed a notch above in protocol. Salary will, however, be equivalent to the three service chiefs.

The CDS will serve as the permanent chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. He will administer the tri-service organisations, agencies and commands related to cyber and space. He will also be a member of the Defence Acquisition Council, chaired by the Defence Minister, and the Defence Planning Committee, chaired by the National Security Advisor. In the strategic domain, the CDS will function as the military adviser to the Nuclear Command Authority, chaired by the Prime Minister.

The recently created specialised tri-service divisions, special operations, cyber and space will come under the ambit of the CDS. While each of the divisions will draw personnel from all three services, the Special Operations Division, headquartered in Agra, will be headed by the Army. The Defence Cyber Agency, based in New Delhi, will be headed by the Navy and

Defence Space Agency, based in Bengaluru, by the Indian Air Force. It has been clarified that the three chiefs will continue to advise the Defence Minister on matters exclusively concerning their respective services, and that the CDS will not exercise any military command, including over the three service chiefs, so as to be able to provide impartial advice to the political leadership. The government has also decided to bring the DMA under the ambit of the Right to Information Act.

As per notification of the government, the mandate of the DMA will include the following areas:

- a. promote jointness in procurement, training and staffing for the services through joint planning and integration of their requirements;
- b. facilitate restructuring of military commands for optimal utilisation of resources by bringing about jointness in operations, including through establishment of joint/theatre commands;
- c. promote the use of indigenous equipment by the services;
- d. implement the Five-Year Defence Capital Acquisition Plan;
- e. assign inter-services prioritisation to capital acquisition proposals based on the anticipated budget; and
- f. bring about reforms in the functioning of three services aimed at augmenting combat capabilities of the Armed Forces by reducing wasteful expenditure.

## **Coordination and Jointmanship**

The government expects that this reform in the higher defence management will enable the Armed Forces to implement coordinated defence doctrines and procedures and go a long way in fostering jointmanship among the three services. (While jointmanship is not a common English expression, the Indian Armed Forces define it as 'integrated planning and application of military power at the strategic, operational and tactical levels, with proper sequencing of combat power of the three services). Good jointmanship will result from proper joint training, understanding of each other's capabilities and limitations and build mutual trust, confidence and respect for each other.

Two models of higher defence management prevail among major countries. The United States (US) follows the 'Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee' model, while the United Kingdom, France, Canada and Australia follow the 'Chief of Defence Staff' model. Both models have evolved after World War II when it became abundantly clear that joint operations involving all the services were essential to synergise a war effort. The need was also felt for a single point military advice to the government rather than each service taking up its respective viewpoint with the government individually. Neither of these systems in any way curtails the right of the individual service to approach the Defence Minister on matters of importance to it.

## Challenges

India faces a rather complex security environment due to territorial disputes with its neighbours and an oft repeated nuclear overhang, besides the proxy war that rages continuously. There are air space violations and incursions into its coastal zone. Each of these security issues now requires a single point military advice which is well coordinated among the three services. The CDS must be empowered to iron out inter-services priorities so as to create a template for an integrated long-term perspective plan. As of now, it appears that the three services operate in silos, have been engaged in inter services recriminations and are engaged in pursuing their own institutional interests. There does not appear to be 'helicopter view' of the entire defence macro picture which sees an integrated picture of all the services functioning as a well oiled single machine. The CDS will be called upon to build an environment of trust, engage in give and take and ensure that every service complements the other in a holistic operational thrust. It will have to weed out redundancies that have crept in, with each service creating capabilities which overlap thereby leading to avoidable expenditure and often entail a coordination nightmare.

The challenge before a CDS will be of the kind that the military leadership has not confronted. Placing national interests, over narrow service affiliations, and looking after the interests of all the three services will always be challenge that no service officer would ever have faced. Presently, the army sees a dominating role for itself in the kind of conflicts that the country has engaged in. However, this factor will have to be balanced with an emerging scenario wherein both maritime and air powers are going to play an increasingly important role in India's rise as a leading strategic power. Herein lies the success of the functionary to grow out of the colour of his uniform and assume an overarching role. He will also be called upon to take a global geo-political view with a street suaveness necessary to engage with diverse stakeholders.

The nature of threat that the nation faces has become complex with the newer technologies and so has the nature of warfare where distinctions between land, air and waters, and now cyber, have blurred. This has to be factored in while drawing up the mandate and providing operational flexibility to the CDS.

## Need for a CDS

There has been growing mistrust among the Armed Services and the civilian bureaucracy in the MoD. The Armed Forces headquarters tend to believe that delays in acquisitions occur because of uncalled bureaucratic interventions. The fact that the DMA will be housed in the MoD should be able to alleviate this inadequacy. However, at the same time, there is no need for the DMA to create another parallel bureaucracy which begins de novo examination of all proposals. This attitude will only enhance the misgiving. The principal responsibility of the CDS will be to see the big picture (the helicopter view) and ensure that all sides remain committed to that macro objective of making India secure. The Constitution makers have visualised India as a democracy in which the political/elected executive was supreme. However, between the uniformed services and the political executive, a civilian bureaucratic layer was added to ensure that issues and interests remain balanced. The states have seen a rather blurring of the lines between the police and their political masters. In fact there has

been growing alignment between the two. To buck this trend, a 'sandwich' bureaucracy has been provided in the MoD. The CDS will be uniquely placed to be able to build trust between itself and the service headquarters on the one side and the civilian bureaucracy, on the other. Being successful in this fine balancing act will render the CDS to be the 'game changer' that it is being touted to be.

There are several other areas which necessitate overarching military command and control at the national level. While India's nuclear doctrine and policy are guided by the National Security Council and the Cabinet Committee on Security, their execution is entrusted to the services and here a joint approach is mandatory. The Strategic Forces Command, constituted for the planning, coordination and control of India's nuclear weapons, must function directly under the CDS even while functional control over the nuclear warheads and the delivery systems remains with the civilian political leadership.

Similarly, on the non-operational side, training institutions such as the National Defence Academy, College of Defence Management, National Defence College, Defence Services Staff College and organisations like the Armed Forces Medical Services, Canteen Stores Department, etc., should be placed under the administrative control of the CDS for better synergy in their functioning and optimum exploitation of their potential.

The CDS has been a 'felt need' of the Armed Forces for a long time. Many committees have recommended its creation. It is very essential that the government ensures a formal, well-documented mandate for the CDS' effective functioning to ensure that he actually performs the functions which upgrade military administration, procurement, training, logistics and fosters a culture of jointmanship as its role specifies. He should not become another layer to be cleared before a decision is taken, thereby delaying rather than expediting decision making. Critics of the appointment suspect that the CDS may merely become a glorified Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee without any independent mandate or operational flexibility, thereby making the MoD a more complicated labyrinth than it presently is.

It is also feared that the CDS post should not become a sinecure for a chief of any of the three services who is retiring. Institutions created by government need to be empowered to take decentralised decisions in their own area and not have to keep approaching the political executive for approvals. There needs to be a roadmap for the further empowerment, if proven successful, of the CDS to be assigned operational responsibilities in a phased or incremental approach.

This is essential as the CDS would provide clarity in the direction the government is heading as there are apprehensions within the military that a unified command structure with further theatre commands (as in the US system) reporting independently to the cabinet committee on security, may further dissipate the command and control structure of the respective chiefs. The government may even decide to vest the CDS with 'administrative' powers (as was recommended by the Arun Singh Committee in 2001). Hence, there is a need to provide a clearly delineated roadmap to ensure the successful advent of a reform structure which could well become a harbinger of greater reforms and successes in the future.

## Conclusion

The CDS has taken a long time in coming. It has been under discussion over a couple of decades. This has largely been due to the fact that there was lack of consensus within the defence establishment itself on the advisability of creating such a department. The Navy and Air Force have harboured a suspicion that the new office would be dominated by an Army appointee, thereby distancing their voice from the political class. Added to these suspicions was that of the bureaucracy which probably apprehended a slipping away of its own supremacy. The political executive has had its own share of insecurity in the creation of a powerful military officer at the apex which may encourage 'praetorian tendencies in the services'. It is thus as much a responsibility of the political executive as it is of the initial appointee to the post of CDS to make the reform a 'game changer' – the former in ensuring it entrusts the newly-created department with 'real' powers and the latter in setting aside narrow service loyalties and rising to be a genuine 'first among equals' with a macro vision.

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