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Why the Chief of Defence Staff Should be the Principal Defence Advisor?



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Abstract

The Government of India's decision to appoint the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) should be considered an opportunity to set in motion defence reforms to remove outdated organisational structures that are impeding capability development and modernisation of the armed forces. The political leadership took a profound view of the current gap in defence planning and management of defence sector that is hindering capability development to fight future wars. As a result, there is a need to create an institution that can harmonise resources, technology, and doctrines to prepare Armed Forces to fight future wars. Defence Secretary with the current structure of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) may not be suitable or qualified to render defence advice. Therefore, unless MoD is restructured, the domain of military and defence advice should rest with the CDS instead.

Key Points

- The Government of India has displayed the political will to initiate long-overdue defence reforms by announcing the establishment of the CDS to have single point defence and military advice.
- The Defence is a nuanced issue of governance that requires a profound understanding of the formulation of defence policy, defence planning, and capability development for the prosecution of the war. Therefore, defence advisor must have institutional inputs and professional experience.
- Appointment and Charter of the CDS should not be looked at from the prism of protocol and turf war, but an important function of national security.
- With the current structure, MoD is ill-equipped to render any meaningful advice on defence matters to the political leaders.
- It will be unwise to divide defence and military advice between two institutions that are not integrated. It would lead to diverse and conflicting inputs without integration.
- Pre-conditions to enable defence secretary to render defence advice is integration of MoD with Services HQ. It is high time reforms must start from MoD and should have professionals organic to its structure.

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Introduction

We often hear that political will is missing to reform and restructure national security architecture, but the incumbent Prime Minister Modi changed this perception and set in motion defence reforms by announcing the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) on 15 August 2019. The objective is to harmonise the military capabilities to sharpen the national response to the emerging threats to India. PM Modi said, “It will help all three services to walk together as the country can no longer afford to work in silos.”¹ Political leadership has set in motion a process to restructure the Armed Forces for developing capabilities to fight complex future wars. It is now up to the Armed Forces to position itself as the main stakeholder to steer and shape defence policy, defence planning, and synchronise with the defence sector for capability development. Ideally, the CDS should assume the responsibilities to implement steps towards practical implementation of national security policy to secure vital national interests. There is a need to move forward from words to action but that move forward should not lead to the status quo.

The announcement by the Government of India should be treated as the “Goldwater-Nichols Act” moment for the Indian Armed Forces. This should be considered as a “perfect storm” that could shake the muddled and multiple chains of command, poor inter-service planning and coordination, ad hoc responses to each new crisis, the inability of one service to communicate with another, and inter-service rivalries and parochialism that hampered the services’ ability to work in concert.² The focus at this stage should be to create an institution that brings synergy between the MoD, the Services Headquarters (HQs) and all other

components that are responsible to build the capabilities of the Armed Forces to prepare to fight future wars. But if the Charter of the CDS remains the same as that of the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) or an upgraded version of the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC), in that case, it will defeat the objectives of creation of the CDS. But before the Charter is laid down there is a need to understand what does defence and military affairs constitute.

Understanding Defence and Military Affairs

The Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) in its report states that while the CDS would be the “Principal Military Adviser”, the Defence Secretary would be the “Principal Defence Adviser” to the Defence Minister (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.³ This is the role CISC, along with three services chiefs are performing even today. If this thought process is implemented by the government, in that case, the nation at best will achieve a status quo. My question is if the government’s intent was to get only military advice, why should they nominate him as the CDS? The government could have nominated him as the Chief of Military Staff (CMS). The political leadership took a profound view of the current gap in defence planning and management of the defence sector that is impeding capability development to fight future wars. Political leadership also seeks to have single-point defence and military advice on issues

of national security to deal with the emerging security challenges to the nation and prosecution of the war. Dividing military and defence advice between two different institutions that are not integrated would lead to diverse and at times conflicting opinions that may defeat the basic purpose of single point advice on matters of defence and military.

What does defence constitute and why should the CDS be responsible for defence advice to the government and not the Defence Secretary? The national defence constitutes a better understanding of war and the expectations that will be placed upon the military and related agencies in the future conflict scenarios.⁴ The defence matters involve periodic Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) to determine future challenges to the national security, defence planning, future force structure, modernisation of forces, defence diplomacy, military budget, defence research for development of military capabilities, and the formulation of doctrines for war. Each issue should be ideally evaluated at the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), MoD and Services HQs, but the key is that there should be one agency responsible to coordinate all aspects related to the matters of defence. There is a need to ask this question, is Defence Secretary or MoD equipped structurally or have organic institutional/departmental support to perform this all-important task of national security to be the principal defence advisor? The obvious answer is “Big No”. Defence Secretary is currently performing the task of managing defence budget, coordination with other ministries, administrative oversight on issues of organisation and procurement. Current functions of MoD are more of housekeeping of the Ministry than of defence planning or capability development.

Similarly, what does the military domain constitute when looked at from the policy paradigm? In nutshell “military affairs” is prosecuting war by employing all military means placed at the disposal of the Armed Forces. It also constitutes coordination among the three services, preparation of long-term integrated perspective plans (LTIPP), threat assessment, training for war, man-management, and preparation of war plans. This is what is being done by CISC and Chairman COSC. The main objective that the government should strive to achieve is to demolish the impenetrable wall between a civilian-driven acquisition process and a military-controlled operational acceptance process that are detrimental to building capabilities.

Why Chief of Defence Staff Must be the Principal Defence Advisor?

It will be a cardinal mistake to accept the CDS restricted to military advice. If CDS, in reality, is CMS, in that case, it means the status quo and keeping military out of the policy formulation and capability development at a time when character and domains of war are changing at a rapid pace. The overall debate seems to be to manage protocol rather than national security more efficiently and dynamically. Institutional advice is not by an individual or protocol, but by a process, institutional support, systems, and organisational structures that are capable of carrying out profound empirical studies that have long-term implications for the national security. Military affairs are at best for dealing with short- and mid-term national security challenges. Whereas defence is long term and has more serious consequences because the development of capabilities and force structure

take decades. There would be no harm if the Defence Secretary has the support of institutions, departments, and domain knowledge or if he is a military professional to perform the most important task of being the principal defence advisor. But if he has none of these, in that case, it is a retrograde step to tie down an elephant to a block of dead wood.

There is merit why the CDS should be a defence advisor. This is because he has institutional and departmental support to formulate draft defence policy, carryout Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), identify and determine future challenges to the national security, oversee defence planning process, force restructuring based on the emerging threats, modernisation of Armed Forces, defence diplomacy (building interoperability with the militaries across the globe), identifying modern technology for enhancing the capabilities of the Armed Forces, management of defence sector to meet the requirements of the defence forces and formulation of defence and military strategies/doctrines. All the earlier-mentioned aspects require profound military domain knowledge.

Another key issue is that defence policy dictates how things should be done in the defence sector.⁵ If Long Term Integrated Perspective Plans (LTIPP) is done by the CDS, in that case, the defence sector should be responsible and accountable to the CDS. If they remain unattached to the military, then the harmonisation of technology and capabilities is unlikely to be achieved.

Business, as usual, is not an option to deal with the changing character of warfare. The time for debate and discussion is over and the task at hand is the implementation of reforms set in motion by the government. Defence is a function of government

that can't be entrusted to those who are not formally trained or educated in matters of defence or have no experience of handling military affairs in peace and war. But it is also important that war can't be entrusted to the generals alone to execute without civilian oversight. When we say civilian oversight, it means political oversight. According to Clausewitz, "War is politics by other means." The CDS should be a principal defence advisor because the overall objective is to bridge the capability gap. At the same time integration of defence sector with the military is of utmost importance for capability building and self-reliance.

The CDS must be empowered through constitutional provision as well as by creating a command and decision support system. The Transaction of Business Rules, 1961 seeks to define the authority, responsibility, and obligations of each department in the matter of transacting the business allotted to it.⁶ The government must bring an Act of Parliament to amend the Transaction of Business Rules to define the charter, role, and responsibilities of the CDS through an Act of Parliament.

Responsibilities of the Chief of Defence Staff

The idea of defence of a nation is undergoing a transformation, therefore, one of the principal tasks of the CDS would be to align military capabilities to the enunciated National Security Strategy (NSS) and harmonise the resources and technology for ensuring national security. The ambiguity in national security will get crystallised once NSS is enunciated by the government. "A strategy will

assist in explaining how the maintenance and possible use of Armed Force can help reduce strategic risks.”⁷ The enduring wars have a global impact and are being decentralised and outsourced by states to non-state actors or proxies. Emerging technologies are both causes and enablers of conduct of wars. Artificial intelligence, information warfare, autonomous weapon systems, deniability by use of digital technology, and the use of space and social media would call for the establishment of cyber, information, space, and psychological warfare domains. Such complex and enduring wars would require a new institution and structures that can harmonise defence sector, military capabilities, and the development of technologies and strategies for future wars. The CDS should now be heading the Defence Planning Committee instead of a national Security Advisor. In military sphere the CDS should coordinate the following:

- Shared situational awareness;
- Building an effective command structure;
- Focus on integration of three wings of the Armed Forces and create organisations that can conduct joint and integrated operations;
- Enhance trust and dependence between defence sector and Armed Forces;
- Harmonise resources, skills, strategies, doctrines, and ethos; and
- Integrated defence planning.

Why Defence Secretary is Not Structured to be the Principal Defence Advisor?

Leon Trotsky had said “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” The most important aspect that needs to be kept in view is that the preparation for war is, in reality,

a deterrence to avoid war. Distribution of responsibilities between the CDS and Defence Secretary should not be viewed from the prism of protocol; it should be based purely in the interest of national security and organisational capability building. The primary task of Principal Defence Advisor is to formulate Defence Policy (on behalf of the political leaders) and set in motion process of defence planning and capability building. Formulation of defence policy is a complex process as it requires a profound understanding of national security risk management, defence planning for future challenges, force management to deal with emerging threats, and technology adaptation to bridge capability gaps. The broad framework of defence policy is defending a country against its enemy.⁸ With the current organisational structure and lack of professional expertise organic to MoD, the MoD and the Defence Secretary is ill-equipped to render any meaningful advice on matters related to defence except defence budget. On all issues related to capability development, SDRS, defence planning, risk management and force structuring, the Defence Secretary is either dependent on the CISC and Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) or Services HQs. Informal inputs on a case-to-case basis are an adhoc arrangement and can lead to flawed decision-making because inputs could be biased in the absence of privileged organisational information. HQ IDS under the current organisational structure has become almost a secretariat for the MoD on matters related to defence planning and capability development. Unless MoD is restructured and integrated with Services HQ, the establishment of the CDS itself will not lead to any meaningful defence and military reforms. The advisor ideally should have experience of understanding matters military

(changing character of war, future wars, defence planning process, and capability development) and defence planning. It would still make sense if MoD has representatives of three services organic to its organisation to formulate defence policy and defence planning.

Responsibilities of Defence Secretary

The role of bureaucracy is vital since managing defence is a complex business and ministers, military officers and civilian officials have to work together to provide effective direction.⁹ It is imperative to understand the relationship between military, bureaucracy, and political leadership to secure the nation from existing and impending threats. It is the responsibility of the military and political leadership to identify the threats to the nation, thereafter it is for the military to define the force structure and capabilities that are essential to secure the nation and in the end, it is the responsibilities of bureaucracy, military, and political leadership to develop capabilities. Finally, it is up to the political leadership to employ the military as a tool of state policy as and when required to secure vital national interests. Therefore, “Nations which fail to develop a balanced pattern of civil-military relations squander their resources and run uncalculated risks.”¹⁰ In the light of the earlier-mentioned facts, each organ has its responsibilities and role to collectively work to create robust military capabilities to defend and secure the country.

Restructuring of the Ministry of Defence

If political leadership expects two-point advices on defence and military affairs, in that case, the

government should first reform MoD and fully integrate Service HQs with the MoD. The MoD must create departments headed by military professionals for defence planning, force structure, capability determination, net assessment for risk assessment (threats and challenges), technology identification, and audit of defence sector. It needs to be understood that any decision taken on issues of defence will have long-term implications, whereas, the military is current and dealing with crises/challenges in the near future. If defence advice is rendered by the CDS the question is what will be the role of Defence Secretary? Defence Secretary should continue to coordinate inter-ministerial issues, management of defence budget, administrative control of defence sector, and issues related to the governance of the MoD. There is widespread inefficiency in defence sector and defence research. Projects are running on open-ended timelines and product not meeting the operational qualitative requirement (QR). The satisfaction level is by and large lacking due to high rates of accidents and system failures. Defence Secretary should exercise administrative control and let the technical control be under the military being the end-users. Therefore, restructuring of the MoD is imperative if the government wants Defence Secretary to act as defence adviser.

Staffing of the Chief of Defence Staff

The CDS is required to provide accurate defence and military advice to the national leadership so that decision-makers can provide strategic direction to the defence forces to deal with emerging and future security challenges. The office of the CDS is expected to identify the challenges

to the national security, monitoring of capability building, and implementation of Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan, resource prioritisation, modernisation, and maintenance of readiness profile of the security forces. Such a task would require a carefully chosen staff so that at no point the CDS is looking over the shoulders towards the Services HQs or any external agency for the inputs on critical issues. Thus, it will be appropriate that the CDS office is staffed with the officers of appropriate level from all the three wings of the Armed Forces, financial adviser from the defence accounts, representatives from external intelligence agency, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) for giving inputs on various ongoing defence projects and technological related advice, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) for space-related issues, media advisor and staff to deal with cyber, information, and electronic warfare.

There is a need to optimise the existing staff to avoid the creation of another layer at MoD and at HQ IDS level. In addition, the integrated commands as and when created should also look at merging the staff and surplus staff could be utilised for enabling the CDS and integration of Services HQs with the MoD. This would require diligent efforts and should be done in a phased manner.

Conclusion

What India requires is building a fortified national defence and a strong military commensurate with the country's core national interests and international standing.¹¹ Declaration of the

government to create the CDS is a fresh milestone that holds great promise provided it is not diluted and the reform process is not reversed by creating division in defence and military. It is not important who renders defence advice, but more important is how the defence policy is designed and how defence planning is pursued to achieve security objectives. It is not the forces but the capabilities they must have to achieve national security objectives.

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