

## Chief of Defence Staff must be Appointed Immediately

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The Naresh Chandra committee on defence reforms had reportedly recommended the appointment of a four-star permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC), instead of a five-star Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Such a step now appears to be under the active consideration of the government. However, according to news reports, the government is still seeking the views of political parties on the necessity of the step.

Consequent to the submission of the Kargil Review Committee report in 2000, a task force led by Mr. Arun Singh had been constituted by the group of ministers (GoM) headed by Deputy Prime Minister L. K. Advani to analyse the functioning of the higher defence organisation in India and suggest measures for its improvement. Among the major recommendations of this task force was the creation of the post of the CDS supported by a tri-Service joint planning staff. The GoM accepted this recommendation. However, while the tri-Service Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) was finally constituted in 2002, it is still headed by a three-star officer who reports to the Chairman COSC. Approval of the post of CDS was deferred by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) pending further consultations. The two reasons cited for the deferment were the lack of political consensus on the establishment of the post of CDS and opposition within certain sections of the armed forces.

Success in modern war hinges on the formulation of a joint military strategy and its joint and integrated execution. The need for single point military advice for India's civilian political masters cannot be over emphasised. With India's "no first use" nuclear strategy, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) would be in a real quandary if at a critical stage during war, when the adversary has unleashed the nuclear genie, the Chiefs of Staff express divergent views on the payoffs of using nuclear weapons in a retaliatory strike and the type and nature of response. The service Chiefs would to some extent be guided by the impact of nuclear weapons on their forward-deployed fighting troops and would need to take the prevailing military situation into account while making their recommendations to the government. It is axiomatic that the differences among the Chiefs of Staff are resolved by the military professionals themselves, with one of them acting as the arbitrator. Only a CDS would be able to take a detached view and present an objective analysis of the situation along with the available options and the advantages and disadvantages of pursuing each option.

Ideally, the CDS should be an overall commander-in-chief and from him command should flow to individual theatre commanders. Given India's long land borders with a varied terrain configuration and two major seaboard, as also adversaries who are geographically separated, a "theatre" system of tri-service command is best suited for the optimum management of both external and internal security challenges. Contrary to the belief that only the United States needs a theatre system because of its wider geo-political interests and involvement in security issues all over the globe, with its inimical neighbours and peculiar national security threats and challenges, India too needs a theatre system for integrated functioning to achieve synergy of operations with limited resources. The Chinese, with similar needs, have a well-established theatre system.

Each theatre commander should have under him forces from all the three services based on the operational requirement. The initial allocation of forces need not be permanent and could be varied during war or during the preparatory stage. However, change should be evolutionary and not revolutionary. At the inception stage of the concept of CDS it may be more appropriate to designate the CDS as the "first among equals" and let the three Chiefs of Staff retain operational command and administrative control over their Services. Once the system matures, theatre commanders should be gradually appointed. The Chiefs of Staff of individual Services should then have responsibility primarily for the force structure and for drawing up perspective plans. They should oversee the development and acquisition of weapons and equipment, plan recruitment, guide and coordinate training at specialised training establishments and control administrative matters such as the annual budget, pay and allowances, maintenance support and medical services etc.

The COSC an experiment has not worked very well. It is driven by single-Service requirements and perceptions. It is well known that the Chairman COSC lacks executive authority over Services other than his own Service. The COSC works primarily by consensus and finds it extremely difficult to agree on hard decisions that are binding on all the Services. While the end goal is common, there are always disagreements on the route to be followed to get there. During peace time, turf battles and inter-Service rivalries rule the roost and minor, inconsequential issues take up most of the time available for discussion. War time decisions require professional understanding of complex military operations, a bi-partisan approach and, often, hard compromises. As Winston Churchill famously said, "Committees cannot fight wars."

Often during war, the fate of an entire campaign can hinge on a single decision. Such a decision can only be made by a specially selected defence chief and not by a committee like the COSC that operates on the principle of the least common denominator. Military history is replete with examples of how such decisions changed the course of a war. Eisenhower's decision to launch the Normandy landings in the face of continuing rough weather and MacArthur's decision to land at Inchon against stiff opposition from virtually his entire staff could not have been made by committees. All other major democracies have opted for the CDS system. India cannot ignore it any further except at great peril. It is an idea whose time has come.

It is time to implement the old GoM decision to appoint a CDS. Theatre commands are but one step further in the quest for synergy in operations. It should be a short step, but

knowing the way the Indian system works, it is likely to be a very long one indeed. In the prevailing battlefield milieu of joint operations, combined operations and even coalition operations, modern armed forces cannot be successful without a well-developed and deeply ingrained culture of Jointmanship.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.*