

## Higher Defence—Reforms and Creation of the Post of CDS

**K V Thomas**

The Higher Defence Structure and Organisation that we have inherited from Lord Mountbatten, the last British Viceroy in India and his Chief of Staff Lord Ismay remained almost static for many decades after India's independence in 1947. The Sino-Indian Conflict in 1962 was instrumental in creating new defence consciousness in the country, particularly among the political class who hitherto was weaving dreams of a world blessed with peace, friendship, fraternity and non-alignment. Despite a couple of serious wars with our hostile neighbour in 1965 and 1971 and mounting threats and challenges to our national security, piece-meal and *ad hoc* defence reforms were undertaken periodically without addressing the strategic, logistic or operational requirements of the defence forces. The structural or Higher Defence Organisation Reforms ensuring better coordination and synergy among the defence forces remained untouched as the political class always looked upon such exercises with their own apprehensions, fears and concerns. The Kargil conflict of 1999 exposed such bottlenecks adversely affecting the operational potential of armed forces.

In fact, Kargil Review Committee (KRC) which looked into the various intricate areas of national security architecture such as Intelligence, border management, nuclear deterrence, use of air power, counter-insurgency operations, etc. had signalled the need of defence management and reforms. The Group of Ministers (GoMs), in its report of 2001, had made major recommendations including the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) which has been kept in abeyance due to the lack of consensus among the major stakeholders. The Naresh Chandra Task Force Committee which submitted its report on May 23, 2012 emphasised the need of radical defence reforms, especially in the area of national security decision making process. Though the full report of the Committee has not been made public, its key recommendations that were available in the public domain *inter-alia* included: appointment of a permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) in addition to the army, navy and air force chiefs of staff and creation of three new tri-service commands (Special Operations Command, Aerospace Command and Cyber Command) to better manage new challenges and vulnerabilities in modern warfare. The permanent Chairman of COSC, as recommended by the Committee is considered to be a precursor to the post of CDS, as such a permanent post instead of the existing set-up of a rotational Chairman will certainly be able to better coordinate the modernisation plans of the three services and improve the management of tri-service institutions. Lt General (Retired) Shekatker Committee which examined various measures to enhance combat capability and rebalance defence expenditure of the armed forces, in its recommendations (December 2016), felt that the appointment of CDS in many respects will meet key requirements of the defence forces.

Thus, the way for the appointment of CDS was clear as early as 2001, which, however, was formally announced by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the ramparts of the Red fort on August 15, 2019. No doubt, the Prime Minister deserves the credit for the implementation of the recommendation of the GoMs in 2001, subsequently endorsed by the Naresh Chandra Committee on National Security in 2012 and further ratified by an Expert Committee of Ministry of Defence (MoD) headed by Shekatker Committee in 2016. Many strategic and defence analysts expect that higher defence management will improve significantly with the appointment of the CDS; whereas there are others who think that a system 'where all

three services would work more closely as a team (with CDS), is not a healthy development'.<sup>1</sup> They foresee inherent dangers on the concentration of powers on a single point authority and the turf battles among the top brass of three services.

However, the government's own press communique on the CDS tried to mitigate many such apprehensions and concerns. As per the statement, "CDS will give effective leadership to the services at the top level of decision making; improve coordination amongst the three services, and prepare them better to deal with rapidly changing security environment and the changing nature of warfare."<sup>2</sup> In order to achieve the above objectives, a new Department of Military Affairs (DMA) to deal with the Armed Forces (Army, Navy and Air Force) would be formed in the Ministry of Defence and oversee important tasks such as procurement of the services, rationalisation and prioritisation of resources and the welfare and morale of the personnel. Similarly, the CDS will play diversified roles as the permanent COSC; a member of the Defence Acquisition Council headed by the Defence Minister, Defence Planning Committee headed by the NSA, military advisor to the Nuclear Command Authority and as the principal military advisor to Defence Minister on all tri-service matters. Further, elaborating the new set up, the Prime Minister underlined, "the creation of the DMA with the requisite military expertise and institutionalisation of the post of CDS is a momentous and comprehensive reform that will help our country face the ever changing challenges of modern warfare."<sup>3</sup>

A reality check of the defence reforms, particularly at the higher level of the forces during the last few decades reveals that the overall organisational structure at the top remained static. The proposed integration of three services with the formation of Integrated Commands for greater operational efficiency could not make much headway as the Army, Navy and Air force assiduously tried to guard their own turfs. The only Tri-services Command that had come up in Andaman Nicobar Archipelago in 2001 in the aftermath of the KRC report could not effectively take off on the desired lines due to turf battles, politico-bureaucratic apathy and fund crunch. A Strategic Forces Command was set up in 2003 to handle nuclear arsenal. As rightly pointed out by the Prime Minister, the ever changing challenges of the modern warfare, especially from cyber space and modern weapons necessitate the country to initiate and spearhead doctrinal and transformational changes such as the formation of 'theatre commands' from a strategic point of view. A dominant opinion that is gaining ground among defence and strategic analysts is that it is high time that India, which has now 17 Single Service Commands, should move towards Integrated Commands to save resources and to meet the new challenges in modern warfare. Needless to mention that leading world powers such as the United States, China, etc. have already undertaken such transformational and strategic changes to equip their forces to meet the new challenges. For example, the US, as superpower with her 'geo-political and strategic interests' around the globe, has now 11 Unified Combatant Commands to handle 'geographic' and 'functional challenges' that it faces from different corners of the world. Similarly, the Chinese Premier Xi Jinping during 2014-16, besides sizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA), reduced the number of military regions from seven to five "Theatre Commands" under joint command of the ground, naval, air and rocket forces, mainly to enhance the offensive air and naval capabilities into the East China Sea, which has become a strategically hot spot for China. India, no doubt, has such strategically sensitive areas in the north (with China); west (with Pakistan/POK/Afghanistan); East (Bangladesh and Myanmar with bases of insurgent groups); South/Peninsular India (Sri Lanka, Maldives) and of course the Maritime Boundary of over 7500 km.

Now, it is the right time to ponder over as how the higher level defence reforms closely intertwined with the national security and sovereignty of the nation failed to get due attention over the last many decades? Reasons are many. First, it is the issue of ignorance or insensitivity of the political class, especially the political executives handling key defence portfolios, on the emerging changes or the challenges in the area of warfare. Admiral Arun Prakash (Retired) succinctly put it as “Control of the military not only demands knowledge of strategic and military affairs but also involves tremendous responsibility; it also places heavy demands on the time of the minister assigned the defence portfolio. Successive Defence Ministers have found it convenient to delegate this responsibility to the civilian bureaucracy in the incorrect belief that ‘civilian control’ of the military can be exercised, on their behalf, by the bureaucracy.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, over the years such trends have become more copious when those functionaries restricted their role to attending ceremonial parades of Armed forces or visiting far-flung operational bases of defence personnel than to undertake serious introspection on the strategic, logistic or human resources issues of the forces. Such sensitive tasks were left to the exclusive domain of a handful of handpicked bureaucrats in the South Block. As the overwhelming majority of the senior bureaucracy in the country is ‘generalist’ in nature and guided by overriding career ambitions, many of them holding key assignments failed to lay their hands on controversial issues or projects. The result was that time-bound defence procurement deals or sensitive projects were either dropped or delayed for indefinite period becoming them totally out of sync with the new challenges or requirements. The more controversial the projects or proposals, the greater the delay or the rate of drop out. Perhaps the best example is the Rafale deal.

Such lacunae in defence planning, preparation, strategy and reforms can be overcome only when the political class is fully conversant with the real challenges that our defence forces confront with. Above all, political aims and requirements imposed themselves on war and dictated its intensity. Thus goes the famous dictum of Carl von Clausewitz, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian General, “War is a continuation of state policy with the admixture of other means”.<sup>5</sup> Almost on the lines of Carl Von, the NDA government—initially as a tactical move—focused on internal security and Armed forces, as manifest by the September 2016 cross-border raids and surgical strikes on terror camps in Pak territory during February 2019 that paid rich dividends to the alliance during 2019 polls. The abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of Jammu and Kashmir is construed as yet another move by the government to demonstrate its policy of successfully confronting cross-border terrorism. Viewed in this backdrop, the creation of the post of CDS is interpreted as the beginning of the strategic transformation that will propel the evolution of structured security doctrines and strategies for the country. Definitely, it is a welcome step in the existing geo-political and strategic situation in the sub-continent.

The success of the strategic transformation of our Armed forces and for that matter the creation of the post of CDS or the DMA depends upon a number of factors. The efficacy of the CDS will depend on the quality of his relations with the Chiefs and the Defence Secretary. For establishing harmonious relations among these key functionaries, their status and charter of duties should be well defined. A better synergy among the three forces and other allied establishments such as the Coast Guard is vital to improve the professionalism of the forces. The major question is as how the Service Chiefs would respond to the idea of Integrated or geographical Commands, especially in the backdrop of the open reservations expressed by the IAF in the past, in accepting such proposals. The evolution of the structured reforms should not be confined to the appointment of CDS; it should be followed up in the

case of the other departments, particularly the newly formed DMA in the MoD, so that military and civilian bureaucracy would work together in the interest of the country. Simultaneously, the CDS, using his status and authority, should initiate measures for the judicious use of resources, ensure welfare of the personnel, cut the red tape which has held up reforms in the procurement, Make in India, indigenous and other areas.

No doubt, in any democratic set up, populist defence reforms and tactical moves would foment criticism and opposition from political parties. But parties and organisations while exercising such freedom should not try to defeat reforms or changes that would help the professionalisation of our armed forces and augment our internal security architecture. Perhaps the best example is the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganization Act of 1986<sup>6</sup> that made the most sweeping changes to the United States Department of Defence by reworking the command structure of the United States military. The entire American Congress and the Senate were almost unanimous in enacting the Act formally signed by the then President Ronald Reagan. Such national consensus is vital for the successful implementation of reforms, especially those pertaining to defence and other sensitive establishments.

***K V Thomas is Senior Fellow at CPPR and Assistant Director (Retd), Intelligence Bureau, MHA, Government of India. He can be contacted at tomskara@yahoo.co.in***

***Views expressed are personal and need not reflect or represent the views of Centre for Public Policy Research***

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.newsclick.in/Former-Navy-Chief-Message-Leadership-Army-Chief>. Accessed January 4, 2020.

<sup>2</sup><https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/view-dealing-with-bureaucracy-will-be-a-challenge-for-the-cds/articleshow/73053872.cms>. Accessed January 4, 2020.

<sup>3</sup>*The Times of India*, Cochin, January 3, 2020.

<sup>4</sup>From the speech of Admiral Arun Prakash (retired) published on CPPR website. <https://www.cppr.in/articles/the-regional-scenario-and-indias-national-security-challenges>.

<sup>5</sup><https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carl-von-Clausewitz>. Accessed January 2, 2020.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP308.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP308.html). Accessed January 4, 2020.