

**A TOP POST, ITS PROMISE AND PERIL****Context:**

- ▶▶ On Independence Day, our honourable Prime Minister announced the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).

**Introduction:**

- ▶▶ The CDS is a high military office that oversees and coordinates the working of the three Services.
- ▶▶ CDS shall provide “effective leadership at the top level” to the three wings of the armed forces, and to help improve coordination among them.
- ▶▶ It offers seamless tri-service views and single-point advice to the Executive (in India’s case, to the Prime Minister) on long-term defence planning and management, including manpower, equipment and strategy, and above all jointmanship in operations.

**Practice so far:**

- ▶▶ India has had a feeble equivalent known as the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC); but this is a toothless office, given the manner in which it is structured.
- ▶▶ The senior-most among the three Service Chiefs is appointed to head the CoSC, an office that lapses with the incumbent’s retirement.

**Background:**

- ▶▶ Officially, this post was first proposed by the Group of Ministers Report in 2001 but the idea for a CDS can be traced back to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the architect of India’s higher defence organisation.
- ▶▶ The first proposal for a CDS came from the 2000 Kargil Review Committee (KRC).
- ▶▶ What transpired during Kargil War and the recommendations of the Kargil Review Committee for setting up the CDS is important to be taken care of.
- ▶▶ It took a fortnight after the incursions were initially detected before the Indian Air Force (IAF) could be pressed into countermeasures.
- ▶▶ The then Indian Army Chief was away on a foreign tour and there was inadequate appreciation of the ground situation by the Indian Army.

- ▶▶ Poor sharing of intelligence, squabbling between the IAF and the Indian Army over whether to use helicopters or fixed wing aircraft and how and who should call the shots have comprehensively blunted the initial response.
- ▶▶ The Kargil Review Committee thus formed gave its recommendations and the crucial one among them was regarding formation of CDS.
- ▶▶ GoM – it underlined the need for more coordination among the three Services, which was poor in the initial weeks of the Kargil conflict.
- ▶▶ The KRC Report pointed out that India is the only major democracy where the Armed Forces Headquarters is outside the apex governmental structure.

### Why change it now?

- ▶▶ CoSC arrangement is seen as “unsatisfactory”, and its Chairman as a “figurehead”.
- ▶▶ The post did not further tri-service integration, resulting in inefficiency and an expensive duplication of assets.
- ▶▶ The CoSC system is a leftover from the colonial era, with only minor changes being carried out over the years.
- ▶▶ Apprehensions in the political class about a powerful military leader, along with inter-Services bickering, have long worked to disincentivise the upgrade of the post.

### Advantages of the CDS Position:

- ▶▶ The creation of the post of the Chief of the Defence Staff fulfils a long-felt and consistently articulated need to strengthen India’s defence posture.
- ▶▶ Ultimately the decision must have been thrust centre stage by the current strategic environment. What was always desirable became an urgent necessity.
- ▶▶ The following forces will have no doubt that it has heightened sense of alert and in a seamless state of coordination to meet the challenges.
  - ❖ Pulwama and Balakot attack.
  - ❖ The repeated offers for mediation in Kashmir by the U.S. President
  - ❖ The imminent pull-out of American troops from Afghanistan, which would leave Pakistan and its proxies with a strong chance of blowback into Kashmir
  - ❖ The abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A
- ▶▶ It observed that Service Chiefs devote most of their time to their operational roles, “often resulting in negative results”.
- ▶▶ Long-term defence planning suffers as day-to-day priorities dominate.
- ▶▶ Also, the Prime Minister and Defence Minister do not have the benefit of the views and expertise of military commanders, in order to ensure that higher level defence management decisions are more consensual and broad-based.

- ▶▶ The CDS is also seen as being vital to the creation of “theatre commands”, integrating tri-service assets and personnel like in the US military.
- ▶▶ The CDS is expected to bridge dangerous gaps and reduce response time during war time. It is envisaged that he will keep the Defence Minister continuously and fully briefed and effectively advised.
- ▶▶ It is also expected to be a part of the adjunct apparatus of the Cabinet Committee on Security Affairs and better link the three services in terms of planning, coordination and execution.
- ▶▶ It will certainly leave the three service chiefs to focus on running their arms of the forces more efficiently.
- ▶▶ This move will no doubt bring the strategic forces under the CDS as well. The government should use the opportunity to ramp up the intelligence apparatus that is concomitant to this office.

### Arguments against the formation of CDS:

- ▶▶ Theoretically, the appointment of a CDS is long overdue, but there appears to be no clear blueprint for the office to ensure its effectiveness.
- ▶▶ India’s political establishment is seen as being largely ignorant of, or at best indifferent towards, security matters, and hence incapable of ensuring that a CDS works.
- ▶▶ Militaries by nature tend to resist transformation.
- ▶▶ The absence of foresight and understanding might end up making the CDS just another case of “jobs for the boys”.

### Implementation Committee:

- ▶▶ Currently there are no further details on the proposed powers of the CDS.
- ▶▶ According to one report, an “implementation committee” has been established comprising the Defence Secretary, Chief of Integrated Defence Staff and other unnamed officers. This is considered itself to be as a mistake.
- ▶▶ The committee should ideally be headed by a political leader and/or a rank outsider, who should have no skin in the game.
- ▶▶ Indeed, the experience of defence reforms in other countries suggests that it is best to have qualified ‘outsiders’ involved in the process.
- ▶▶ Serving officials can of course assist such an individual or a team but expecting them to curtail their own powers is quixotic.

## Major issues underway:

### 1. Overcoming resistance

- ▶▶ In more than one Combined Commanders Conference, the annual gathering of senior most officers from all three services, Prime minister has asked them to come up with a common plan for greater integration.
- ▶▶ It is still unclear what the modalities of this proposed plan were but it was known that there recommendation of creating a Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.
- ▶▶ Fortunately that was not accepted since it is perceptually a step below the CDS. But these interactions reveal an obvious detail that the service chiefs and their headquarters will bitterly oppose creating an empowered CDS.
- ▶▶ India's is perhaps the only large military wherein the service chiefs retain both operational and staff functions.
- ▶▶ This anomaly cannot continue merely because that is the tradition.
- ▶▶ If this government wants a "new India" it will have to break decisively from the past and draw up a time-bound road map to divest the chiefs of their operational command.

### 2. Zeroing in

- ▶▶ One of the most closely watched decisions will be the appointment of the first CDS.
- ▶▶ The government need not go with the seniority rule and should instead consider a "deep selection" from current pool of flag officers. To begin with, and to assuage the fears of the smaller services, it may be wise to not let an Army officer to first tenet this post.
- ▶▶ Moreover, it is not necessary, or perhaps even desirable, for a former service chief to be appointed as the CDS.
- ▶▶ As a fulcrum for future defence transformation and armed with a possible mandate to examine inter-services prioritisation, long-term planning, officer education and jointness, the CDS can emerge as the biggest "game changer".
- ▶▶ But if the services have their way then this will be just another gloried post, without much effective powers.

### 3. Relationship between Civilian Bureaucracy and the Military

- ▶▶ Finally, an important aspect of any reorganisation should look at the inter-se relations between the military and the Ministry of Defence.
- ▶▶ This needs to focus on capacity, expertise, decision-making powers and aligning responsibility and accountability.
- ▶▶ The relations between the civilian bureaucracy and the military are among the biggest fault-lines in the defence apparatus.

- ▶▶ Remedial actions are required on both sides to create a professional, well-developed and qualified bureaucracy which integrates both civilian-military expertise.

### Way Ahead:

- ▶▶ India is the only country with an MoD without military professionals, with bureaucrats lacking a military background and knowledge.
- ▶▶ As a result, we lack a cohesive national security strategy; national security objectives remain undefined.
- ▶▶ There is little synergy within the military and also the military-industrial complex remains in a pathetic state.
- ▶▶ The Government needs to be bold with this initiative and should understand that his military and civilian advisers, institutionally, have an interest in undermining it.
- ▶▶ So, the manner in which this office is set up portends either the greatest, necessary transformation of the Indian military or a name sake appointment with a middling mandate and a middling job.

