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# Chief of Defence Staff

## A Far-reaching Decision



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Published in September 2019 by  
Vivekananda International Foundation  
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## **About the Author**



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## **Acknowledgement**

The author's somewhat similar theme articles been published by India's eminent military journals, the Indian Defence Review and the South Asia Defence and Strategic Review in 2015 and 2017.

# Chief of Defence Staff: A Far-reaching Decision

*“The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now”, - Chinese proverb*

## **A Need Unattended**

Though it is known that the recommendation to have an institution of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in the nation's defence establishment was made in Year 2000 by the 'Kargil Committee', actually the need had been felt some years before that. That was the time in the early 1990's, when the defence budget was so squeezed that the war-worthiness of the armed forces fell well below the level as mandated in the Government's directive<sup>1</sup>. The case, however, received more serious attention, when post-nuclearisation, an architecture for national command authority had to be devised.

A decade down the line, the need remains unattended yet. This inertia is particularly jarring when compared to the great restructuring that proceeds briskly in the rest of India's state-apparatus. In contrast, the military

institution, the entire defence sector in fact, continues to wallow in a system long rendered obsolete, much to the detriment of national interest. The matter therefore calls for serious attention.

This paper argues that the necessity of the institution of CDS goes deeper than nuclear weaponisation or lessons of Kargil War. It suggests that an institution of *CDS is needed to foster that level of operational efficiency in the Indian armed forces which would allow the nation to reap full benefits of its investments in military security within its technological, industrial and economic capacity.*

### **The Proposition**

The proposition of the Kargil Committee was straight forward for the nation's policy making body to understand, its limited familiarity with the complexities of management of the military institution notwithstanding. Briefly put, the case was built around the argument that it was necessary to have a professional body of highest standing to render single point advise on matters of the nation's military security to the Raksha Mantri (RM) and the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), including the articulation of nuclear weapons and its conventional imperatives. Factual no doubt, yet this line of argument was open to dilution from many angles of contrived validity. Without going into the merits of such repudiations, it may be appropriate to touch upon these just to build up the discussion.

*One*, it was pointed out that the existing system of advisory confabulations among the political leadership and the three service chiefs could not be stated to have failed. Therefore it really did not matter whether the advise came from single point or three points; difference of opinion among one or more of the individual services could be managed either way, as indeed it has been the case so far. *Two*, the Government having made it clear that it factored its nuclear assets as an answer to intimidation from neighbouring

adversaries rather than as weapons of war, the necessity of installing a CDS was not found so overwhelming; a collegium of National Security Advisor, service chiefs and the Strategic Forces Commander could be marshalled to perform that role.

Of course, the whole issue remains mired by that eternal fear among the power-wielders, that of being marginalised on the high table, besides of course the innate wariness of unfamiliar ventures. Thus the three service chiefs in various permutations, aided by subtle endorsement from the bureaucracy - who as arbitrators of inter-service matters assume the role of *de facto* CDS - have put paid to that proposition for more than a decade. More disconcertingly, the political leadership, inert as ever in acquiring the art of political management of military power, has adopted the expediency of 'measured inaction'. They have thus let the military institution stagnate against mounting challenges of national security.

As opposed to the afore-stated position, the obligation of creating an institution of CDS is best justified by what may be termed as the phenomenon of '*strategising*' for a robust and cost-efficient national '*defence policy*'. It is this phenomenon that must be the fundamental motive for installing a CDS; the other oft cited reasons - coordination of joint-services operations, theatre, strategic, special forces, and cyber commands, defence procurement etc. - are but the natural fallouts of that obligation.

This would need some elaboration.

### **The Universal Philosophy of Military '*Strategising*'**

Flanked by two innately hostile, naturally militarist and collusive neighbours, the criticality of strategising for India's military security continues to gain salience. That salience is further enhanced by the range and pace of geo-political churning of the region. Conversely, the Indian state-craft

stands dictated by societal, political and economic imperatives that pose contradictory priorities. The severest contradiction is that in the coming years there would remain a void between technological, industrial and fiscal resources on the one hand, and the assumption of that desired level of modern military capability which would offer guaranteed achievement of all our security goals on the other. Thus is necessitated a foresighted political, industrial, economic and military balancing act to reconcile objectives enticing with those unsavoury. Indeed, even powerful countries are obliged to limit their politico-military goals to fit within the resources that they find feasible to commit to their military build-up<sup>2</sup>.

No doubt, it is the burden of India's political and the military leadership to address the disconnect between political mandate, techno-industrial capacity, fiscal affordability and military capability. Further, intrinsic to that burden is the challenge which compels military strategists to devise unique means of multiplying the possessed military power in achievement of the national security objectives. This is what the philosophy of '*military strategising*' entails.

### **Examples of Strategising**

The concept of military strategising has ever been an obligatory part of the state's articulation of political power by military means. In recent times, repowering of the American military forces in the post-Vietnam War and post-Cold War periods, military restructuring in Britain, France, Germany and Russia and 'informationisation' of China's People's Liberation Army are some examples of the afore-stated strategising. To illustrate, when debilitated by war-weariness in the government after the Vietnam War, and its reflection in drastic budget cuts, the US military leadership rose to the occasion. They propagated a war-doctrine which was built around just five affordable weapon systems and a compatible force-structure. That

helped America when she reverted to her political preference for military solutions<sup>3</sup>. More relevant illustrations of military strategising under situations somewhat akin to India, however, come from Vietnam and China.

A weaker power, Vietnam, when attacked by China in 1979, refused to commit its regular military formations till the Chinese had advanced across the mountainous border belt, choosing instead to contest that belt with irregular mode of warfare. Thus confronted with the prospect of having to fight across the wrong end of a difficult terrain and a tenuous logistic chain, China had to find a face-saving exit – with a bloody nose. In similar vein, to prevent Taiwan's assumption of sovereignty, China propounds a strategy that is commensurate to her limited military capability as compared to the adversary, the US. Rather than risking the massive US military might, they propose to make it prohibitively costly for the US forces to dominate the China Sea - Taiwan Strait. This is a recourse to be met within their indigenous missile-information war capability, limited as it might be, but nevertheless, effective enough within that localised theatre to make the US military wary.

*Military strategising therefore is a phenomenon that harnesses military genius in multiplying force-capabilities to secure success against odds posed by resource limitations.* It is a joint political and military responsibility, with bureaucracy and defence industry facilitating the endeavour.

### **Prevalent Norms of Strategising for National Defence Policy**

Political wisdom rules that the nation's security objective must be backed up with commensurate military power, and yet, that power must be structured in conformity with the nation's economic and industrial capacity. Herein lie the complexities:-



- *One*, there is no use setting political goals which cannot be backed up with military power;
- *Two*, it is wasteful to raise a military force that cannot be optimally equipped and trained within an affordable budget;
- *Three*, when sovereignty lies with people deprived, socio-economic charter assumes salience over military expenditure;
- *Four*, military power remains the most robust recourse in preserving the nation's core interests, including economics.

In other words, the military structure must be truly in sync with the political, techno-industrial and economical endeavours. We may term this imperative as optimum *force-structuring*.

Next, the objective of optimum force-structuring is sustained by long term budgetary provisions to support force-modernisation. Further, the parameters of modernisation is influenced by the nation's techno-industrial capacity. Notably therefore, structuring military power in consonance with political objectives, harnessing techno-industrial capacity and regulating flow of funds have, in modern times, become intrinsic to military strategic decision making. This is the imperative of optimum *force-modernisation*.

The process of national defence policy-making is set in motion when the concepts of force-structuring and force-modernisation, within the nation's resource affordability, are co-opted into the philosophy of *military strategising*. There is however, a caveat. Tri-service joint operations being an imperative for success in modern warfare, there is a role to be played by a 'high arbitrator' in devising an appropriate *joint-strategy* of force-application. In terms of military preparedness, this joint-strategy dictates

optimal tri-service force-structuring, and as a corollary, the scope of overall force-modernisation. Thus emerges a 'defence policy' to dictate the harnessing of techno-industrial and economic capacities and fine-tuning the phases and time-lines of military modernisation schemes under a dispensation of *jointness*.

Within the ambit of defence policy, the joint-strategy must find reflection in appropriately tuned joint-training, apportioning of budgetary provisions and management of military schemes to control duplications, deviations, and mid-course corrections. Simply put:-

- In fulfilment of the political mandate, there is a need to *synergise the three services to propagate one military strategy*, and back it up by tri-service force-structuring and joint-training.
- Equally important would be a *rational prioritisation of defence research, development, production and procurement - and of course, fund-allocation*.

Obviously, this role cannot be shouldered by the three chiefs, committed as they must be to primacy of their own service, not the least by the defence bureaucracy, scientists and industrialists who cannot have the requisite military insight. Only a professional body, possessing the requisite authority, foresight and the ability to rise above all considerations but the national cause, can articulate that role.

Finally, in the context of harnessing 'dual-use' resources, shaping up the nation's war effort must transcend the orthodox civil-military barrier. Indeed, civilian sectors such as law-and-order, transportation, supply chain, industry, communications, cyber activity etc. have more prominent roles to play in military strategy today than ever before. Many aspects of policy-making at the apex level therefore need to be tempered with military

wisdom to reap the benefits of:-

- Firstly, highlight of military implications of civil endeavours; and,
- Secondly, dove-tailing dual-use resources into military endeavours.

Obviously, an authoritative body of dedicated military professionals, assisted by civilian experts as necessary, is needed to nurture that kind of inter-dependency which would promote the phenomenon of ‘military strategising’<sup>4</sup>.

It needs to be noted that to fulfil the roles discussed above, the aforementioned body of military professionals must be competent in command as well as advisory roles – both being integral to military command functions. Half-measures would not do.

### **The Indian Scene**

At the receiving end of a vicious geo-political gangsterism, India is obliged to maintain one of the world’s largest armed forces - even as her millions struggle to live under abject conditions. The situation is exacerbated by her near-total dependence on war-material imported at excruciating costs. Truly therefore, it is obligatory of the nation’s governing establishment to shape her military institution in a manner that not only secures her national interests, but in so doing, make every penny of her defence investments count. Disconcertingly however, the situation is quite the opposite. Let us see as to why is it so.

*One*, the defence sector in India depicts characteristics long irrelevant, wherein each of its components function in cocoons of their comfort

environment, meeting up only when it just cannot be avoided. To illustrate, each of the three services are committed to their own brand of war-doctrine, data networks, information warfare architecture, logistics – nearly every aspect in fact, even the staff duties. Going further, each service is smug in propagating its primacy in national defence, the other two being assigned to peripheral roles! No doubt, in the era of joint warfare this is an absurd disconnect. Besides being a burden on the exchequer, this affliction retards the application of true ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA). Happily, there is rising appreciation of this concern and many steps are underway to address it.

*Two*, outside the Services, the instinct of indulgence envelops the entire realm of the Defence Ministry. Thus even if they exist to attend to the military’s requirements, defence research, industry, estates etc. are run according to charters that might not be in consonance with what the armed forces seek. Contrarily, in many instances, these venture managers land up undermining the armed forces’ cause in favour of their own turf consolidation! Very well known, this aspects needs no elaboration.

*Three*, in the comfort era of post-1971 War, the nation’s infrastructural ventures seem to be in oblivion of their mandated strategic responsibilities. Thus many times, the practice of incorporating military considerations is overlooked while planning major civil projects of permanent nature like irrigation, highways, railways and power projects. This is a lapse that the nation can ill afford<sup>5</sup>.

*Four*, the attention being drawn by glamorous range of weapons, equipment and drills, the intellectual aspect of *strategising* is discussed but rarely. Even when discussed within the incumbent hierarchy, it remains shrouded under a cloak of phoney ‘confidentiality’. Contrast this with the volume of discussion, debate and experimentation that modern militaries carryout

- with active participation of professionals past and present. Obviously therefore, introspective and perspective joint strategising cannot be expected from the hierarchies who prefer to remain ensconced in their protected cocoon.

These are debilitating and costly infirmities in our national defence planning. An apex body is therefore needed to assist the Government in streamlining the defence strategy and to apportion appropriate tasks and resources to each of its Service components. Next, it is also needed to guide the Government in allocating corresponding targets for defence research, production, procurement etc.

### **Charter for India's CDS**

Having established that a purposefully mandated institution of CDS is obligatory to *tune-in the Indian military structure according to the national objectives within an affordable techno-industrial and fiscal regime*, we may now venture to consider the major aspects of its charter:-

- The foremost charter would be the advisory role in the Government's formulation of the 'National Security Strategy', the current 'Raksha Mantri's Directive' having become irrelevant in the contemporary context.
- Advice, training and force-structuring are the inseparable ingredients of military command function. Overall command and inter-services management functions would therefore be intrinsic to the above role;
- Next, it would be to involve in inter-departmental guidance and integration of defence oriented public and private ventures in implementation of the defence policy.

As already discussed, the CDS would be the prime-mover of strategising for joint-warfare, formulation of joint war-fighting doctrine, tri-service force-structuring, joint-training and overall force-modernisation. The practice of inter-service cooperation not being enough in contemporary warfare, the CDS would need to foster true '*jointmanship*' in the nation's armed forces, cutting down on redundancies and fostering a regime of inter-dependency and interoperability among the three Services. It is so that, more than just the limited responsibilities of nuclearisation and tri-service organisations, there are wider responsibilities that the CDS would need to undertake.

Today, in absence of that institution, these crucial responsibilities lie unattended, much to the detriment of the nation's military security.

### **Affliction of Half-measures**

We have seen that defence planning is shaped by complex and incongruous factors, and that requires an apex body of military professionals to perform the role of interface between the abstract theology of military strategy and the nation's politico-economic-technological-industrial compulsions. Truly, that body has to perform beyond prejudice to conceptualise, guide, monitor and control the nation's military institution as an integral component of the Government's policy-making establishment. These are the ordinations which imparts salience to the case for creation of an establishment of the CDS in India.

On the Government's past attempts to fulfil the need, confabulations had veered around many options. Needless to state, these proposals were in contravention to the fundamental idea, motivated by partisan inter-service, intra-ministerial turf-protection agenda, and duly iced over with

wariness of disturbing the comfort of an entrenched, if anarchical, system. One suggestion was to appoint a 'Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee', who behind a facade of equal status but little authority was expected to remain chair-bound in a toothless committee. Another idea was to occupy the CDS with some pretentious charter of control over such diffused organisations as the strategic forces, the Andaman & Nicobar Command, special forces, cyber security, defence procurements etc. - and little else.

Indeed, besides violating the hoary 'Principles of War', these are options contrived to undermine the institution of CDS as it had been done earlier to the now defunct Defence Planning Staff and the presently asphyxiated Integrated Defence Staff, the purpose being to deflect the proposition from challenging the licence enjoyed by the military as well as civilian defence bureaucracy. Diversionary urge was also manifested when the issue was mired by the supposed likelihood of:-

- *One*, the CDS assuming partisan tendencies to override the system; and
- *Two*, linking it with establishment of integrated theatre commands to the ostensible detriment of 'single-service autonomy'.

No doubt, these protestations are unfounded. If Finance Commission, NITI Ayog and various other regulatory bodies have not gone off the tangent, there is no scope for the CDS to do so. Further, the Service Chiefs would remain as celebrated as before, may be more, the sole difference being that the CDS would fill up the void of an ombudsman or moderator of national defence matters.

Pandering to group afflictions over national interests thus, our nonplussed political leadership had found it convenient to freeze the proposition.

## **Time to Act**

It will take years to streamline the archaic system of higher defence management in India. Meanwhile, trapped in the complexities of the geopolitical adversities, India's compulsion of fostering cost-efficient security is rising by the day. However, in a trend converse, so far our political leadership have not even attempted, let alone succeed, in marshalling the military institution to the requisite level of efficiency. Further, it has been unable to make the fiscal allocations count, adopting instead a simplistic expediency of imposing *ad hoc* budgetary constraints which further exacerbate imbalance in force-modernisation. To top it all, it had chained defence research and military industry from breaking free into the realm of innovations and modernity. In the context of national security, that had been a road to disaster.

Institution of a body of military professionals to participate in defence policy-making at the apex level, duly empowered in highest level of command, management as well as advisory roles, is a call of strategic wisdom. This call must be attended to with alacrity. Institution of a *fully empowered CDS* being the inaugural step towards that end.

With the Prime Minister's announcement on the Independence Day – 2019, The Government has just done that.

## **Endnotes**

1. At that time the services had been forced to accede to what they all knew to be true but were chary of admitting under the influence of the notion of 'service interests'. The fiscal clamp down had led to the realisation that the CDS would be effective in rendering the military force-structure more cost-effective while discarding its redundant elements, and thereby



optimising the nation's military security within an affordable defence budget.

2. Major powers, who have accepted that end are: Britain (adoption of supporting role to US, UN and NATO objectives to downsize military assets), France and Germany (scaling down level of preparedness in favour of long mobilisation time) and China (freezing attempts to 'liberate' Taiwan by force).
3. Truly, that is a saga of dedicated professionalism. It saw a 'hollow' US Army resuscitated to strategise a new doctrine. It focussed on affordable upgrades – mechanised forces, weaponised helicopters and air defence while correspondingly revamping training, personnel management and logistics. All this was achieved by single minded pursuit of a succession of military leaders who rose above the earthy instincts. Similar exercise, albeit to a smaller extent, was undertaken after the Gulf War I when special operations came to prominence.
4. Progress on strategic roads, rail alignments and sidings have been languishing over the years, the priority being routinely ignored. Similar fate has befallen the military sponsored oil pipeline extension and data highway projects.
5. There are many instances when canals and roads have been constructed and aerial mapping carried out in border areas without military clearance.

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The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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