

The Chief of Defence Staff

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India as a nation went through a very traumatic experience in 1962. Our faith in the impregnability of the Himalayas, the infallibility of our foreign policy and the invincibility of our Army, got shattered. I was then an Instructor at Staff College. I was assigned the task of preparing a Telephone Battle exercise for Staff College on mountain warfare, based on our experience in the Himalayas. I toured the battle zone in the North-East to study the terrain and the course of operations that had recently taken place there. This also enabled me to interact with some of the officers who had taken part in those operations.

The tour of the battlefield and research at Staff College, led one to conclude that there were three main reasons for our debacle in the Himalayas. First, a total mismatch between Indian foreign and defence policies. Second, the loss of élan amongst the officer corps in the Indian Army. Third, an irrational higher defence organization in which the Defence Services were increasingly isolated from the process of decision making in defence matters.

Vital issues of war and peace, concerning the nation were being dealt with in a casual manner. For instance, in September 1962, on his way to Colombo, the Prime Minister had issued a statement to the Press at Chennai, that he had ordered the Army to evict the Chinese from the Himalayas. The Army Chief then at Tezpur, wanted written orders to that effect. A Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Defence present at Tezpur gave him those orders. This sequence of events showed the extent to which the Army had been marginalized in the process of decision-making on vital defence matters. What followed is a very painful chapter of our history.

It is worth recalling that after the reverses suffered by them in Boer War, the British carried out extensive reforms in their War Office. At Gallipoli, during the First World War, General Sir Ian Hamilton, commanding the Royal Army, was desperately wanting naval gun fire support but this was not available as the Admiral commanding the Fleet had ordered his warships to clean their boilers!

The Gallipoli disaster taught the British the need for ensuring proper coordination between the Services in battle. The need for this, got further underscored with the emergence of the Air Force as a major partner in battle, whether on land or at sea. There was now need for close professional co-ordination between the three Defence Services. After the First World War, the British introduced a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), comprising the three Service Chiefs in their Defence High Command. This arrangement was also adopted by other countries. During the Second World War, the concept of a Supreme Commander in all theatres of war was evolved. Within a few years after that War, the appointment of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was made at the national level in all countries, except India. Some countries use different nomenclature for this appointment but the functions assigned are the same.

In India the first recorded instance of higher defence organization flourishing was in the empire of Chandragupta Maurya. According to Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador in Chandragupta's court, the Mauryan War Office in the fourth century BC was a combined headquarters for both the Army and the Navy. The Mauryan War Office functioning under the Commander-in-Chief had six boards, each of five officers. These were Infantry, Cavalry, Elephants, Chariots, Admiralty and Commissariat. The War Office looked after a standing Army of nearly three quarters of a million -- 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 elephants and 8,000 chariots plus an unspecified number of warships. The Mauryan Empire extended from Kashmir to Karnataka and Kamarup to Kabul.

During the British era, India was perhaps the only country in the world which had a single Commander-in-Chief for all the three Services. In 1947, this arrangement was discarded and each Service came to have its own Commander-in-Chief, independent of each other. The nomenclature of the three Chiefs was changed in 1955 from Commanders-in-Chief to Chiefs of Staff. This re-designation has been both meaningless and misleading. In our set up, the Chiefs of Staff are not part of the Ministry. They are not authorized to take any decision on behalf of the Government nor issue any Government orders. These functions are performed by civil officials in the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The Service Chiefs continue to function as Commanders-in-Chief of their Service. Thus, it is a misnomer to call our Service Chiefs, Chiefs of Staff.

The debacle of 1962 had failed to motivate us to rationalize our higher defence organization. Like the Bourbon rulers of France, we had learnt nothing nor forgotten anything. The status quo remained.

However, after the Kargil War a Task Force under Arun Singh, a former Minister of State in the Defence Ministry, was set up to examine India's higher defence organization. I was the Governor of Assam at that time. Arun Singh asked me for my views on the subject. In my written submission to the Task Force I suggested the appointment of a CDS and for integration of Services Headquarters (SHQ) with the MoD.

While the recommendations of the Task Force on the Management of Defence were accepted by the Group of Ministers, its implementation has been tardy. We have integrated the Services Headquarters with MoD and even re-designated the three SHQs as Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence(Army/ Navy/Air Force).Like the designation of Chiefs of Staff, this re-designation hardly means anything. Authority in regard to subjects of little consequence, have been delegated to Service Headquarters for integrated functioning but all issues of any consequence are dealt with by the civil officials of MoD. In other words the old arrangement of the civilian bureaucracy exercising authority without expertise or responsibility has continued. Even the suggestion that civil servants in Ministry of Defence should be from the Indian Foreign Service rather than Indian Administrative Service has not been accepted. Defence Policy and Foreign Policy being two sides of the same coin, an officer from IFS is far better suited to serve in Ministry of Defence than an IAS officer. I have been of the view that it will be as illogical to have an IFS officer serving as Home Secretary as it is to have an IAS officer serving as Defence Secretary.

In so far as CDS was concerned, a similar attempt has been made to derail the recommendation of the Task Force, accepted by the Group of Ministers and approved by the Cabinet. A large headless Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) has been provided which serves little purpose. Without a CDS, the required professional co-ordination and unified approach is lacking.

It is worthwhile to examine the arguments used by many, for not having a Chief of Defence Staff in India. Before doing so, it is necessary to take note of the considerations that have been militating against the introduction of this appointment. First, is the political leadership's fear, of the man on the horse back. It is apprehended that the Defence Services will become too powerful and subvert civilian control over the military, a military coup will occur. Second, the opposition of the civilian bureaucracy to any arrangement in which their dominance and stranglehold over the higher defence set up is diminished. Third, the feeling among the smaller Services, particularly the Air Force, of Army dominance in defence policy formulation. Some fear that a CDS may

lead to a situation like the one that prevailed before 1947, when the Army was the dominant Service. Fourth, is the inhibitions of serving Service Chiefs that their position would get undermined if the CDS were to be appointed. In a light hearted vein, it is often said that serving Service Chiefs are not enthusiastic about having a CDS but as their retirement approaches, they get converted to the idea of this appointment.

The fear that a CDS will erode the supremacy of the civil over the military is unfounded. The CDS will not be a Supreme Commander. He will only be an Inter-Service professional coordinator with individual Service Chiefs having the right of direct access to the Head of the Government. It also needs to be mentioned that Army Chiefs in different countries have staged military coups but no CDS has ever done so. India's Defence Services are fully committed to upholding democratic values and in a well established democracy like ours with such diversity, and of continental dimension, the question of a military coup does not arise. In the absence of a Chief of Defence Staff, his functions are virtually being performed, less efficiently by other functionaries.

It is said that adequate coordination is being carried out by the existing Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and this has successfully met our Defence requirements for the last sixty years. Therefore, the present arrangement should not be disturbed. The annually changing part time Chairman of the COSC is in no position to provide effective professional coordination and render unbiased military advice to the Government, without any bias for a particular service. In the present arrangement, controversial issues between the Services get swept under the carpet and differences tend to remain unresolved.

Some people maintain that a CDS may be necessary for nations having global commitments and required to be prepared to fight a global war. The requirement for this appointment arises from the fact that modern war cannot be fought by any Service on its own and has to be a multi-service operation. It has little to do with global or regional nature of a war. Moreover, the huge expenditure on military hardware for the three Services has to be put under the scanner to ensure that wasteful expenditure or duplication in the Services is avoided. All countries in the world and not only the global players have a CDS.

India should not remain the only country in the world without a CDS. Furthermore, the fact that India is now emerging as a global power should not be ignored. The fears of the Navy or the Air Force getting swamped by the Army, which is a much larger Service, are

unjustified. The imbalance in the strength of the Services in many countries like Russia, China, Egypt and so, on have not come in the way of their having a CDS. No matter which Service a Chief of Defence Staff may be from, the question of a bias should not arise when he is not encumbered with the responsibility for looking after his Service. After all even in an individual Service, officers from different streams reaching the top position in their Service have always shown due consideration for other streams. Moreover, a CDS, as in most countries, should be a rotating appointment between the three Services. To put such unfounded fears completely at rest, the first two Chief's of Defence Staff in India should be from the Navy and the Air Force and only thereafter from the Army.

At one stage it was argued that unless there was unanimity among the three Services on having a Chief of Defence Staff, this appointment could not be introduced. After the 1971 war, Air Chief Marshal P. C. Lal had threatened to resign if it was decided to have a Chief of Defence Staff in India. The three Services are said to be now in agreement on this issue. Another hurdle is the requirement that both the ruling party and the Opposition should be in agreement on this issue. Hopefully, even this hurdle will also be crossed one of these days.

None of the arguments against having a CDS are valid. It is high time we in India introduce this appointment and also in due course have integrated field commands. This is imperative for efficient, economical and effective functioning of our higher defence organization in both peace and war. National interests should not be allowed to be held hostage to vested interests.□