

Human Capital for the Department of Military Affairs

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INTRODUCTION

The creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence portends better civil-military cooperation. That India's civil-military cooperation was in need of structural reform was never doubted. Yet, the implementation of such reform lacked political will, faced bureaucratic resistance, and was stymied by elements within the armed services. Political will has finally expressed itself and taken three major steps: the institution of the posts of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and Permanent Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (PC-COSC), and the creation of DMA with the CDS as its *ex-officio* head. Notably, the DMA is expected to have some optimum mix of civil and military domain experts that would work under a military head who is the Principal Military Adviser to the Defence Minister.

For the first time in the MoD, a military department head will have both civil and military staff under him. Previously, there was only a sprinkling representation of serving military officers in other departments and this was mostly confined to the Department of Defence (DoD) Acquisition Wing where two star equivalent officers were posted as Technical Managers. In essence, the model was that military advice was provided to civilian bureaucrats who in turn advised the political head. The change now is that a military head in the form of the CDS as

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the head of the DMA would advise the Defence Minister on 'Military Affairs' and the Defence Secretary as head of the DoD will be responsible for the broader issue of 'Defence of India'.

SEPARATING MILITARY AND DEFENCE

Given the turn of affairs, the query that now needs answering is: what are the implications of splitting the purely 'Military' from 'Defence' within the MoD structure? The major implication is the potential change in the nature of conduct of civil-military relations. In theory, all matters that are primarily military in nature will no longer be arbitrated through the civil bureaucracy. The service chiefs can interact with the Defence Minister on matters pertaining to their service but if the issue is military in nature, the Defence Minister will have to rely on the CDS for advice before taking a decision. If the issue pertains to a broader defence issue, the Minister could seek advice from the Defence Secretary. If necessary, advice could be solicited from any of the department heads though depending on the core issue, one of the departments would act as the nodal agency. The Allocation of Business Rules provides guidance on which department will act as the nodal agency.

LACK OF POLITICAL GUIDANCE

Shaping, maintaining, and applying the military instrument to defend India from external threats are the primary tasks of the MoD. Shaping involves identifying and creation of various instruments of military power that in contemporary times primarily include land, air, sea, space, cyber and information domains. Shaping requires political guidance that delineates the threats and indicates what political objectives the military instrument is expected to achieve. This has been an arena of weakness as India is yet to crystallise a National Security Strategy that could facilitate the MoD to provide political directives to the military. The practice thus far has been that the Defence Minister's Directive originates from the Headquarters of the Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS), and is processed by a civilian bureaucracy that lacks domain expertise and is approved by the Defence Minister. Therefore, the Armed Forces virtually direct themselves! Importantly, since the three services are competing for resources and it was not structurally possible to harmonise differences, the directive ended up accommodating the separate interests instead of integrating them for a common purpose.

The Defence Planning Committee under the National Security Adviser (NSA) that was instituted in 2018 has been tasked to come up with the National Security Strategy. Its progress is unknown and therefore the MoD will have to continue to improvise political guidance as it has been doing so far. What changes now is that there is a greater scope for a politico-military interaction because the CDS is a department head in the MoD. Earlier, the political leadership was handicapped because it frequently got service-centric advice from the three Chiefs. Military advice that was holistic and integrated all forms of military power was not easily forthcoming since the Chairman COSC was a rotatory appointment, often with short tenures, and the incumbent found it difficult to transcend his service specific perspective. Now, with the CDS also being the PC-COSC, the structure is now better amenable in crafting military strategy and providing advice. The CDS can now prioritise the development of various military elements based on the military strategy and resource availability.

Maintaining the existing military wherewithal is essentially dependent on the Revenue budget and is a function mandated to the DMA. Projecting, prioritising, processing and expending the budget would require civilian and military expertise. The extant pressure on the Capital and Revenue budget will require a closer dialogue between the DMA, the DoD, and the political leadership. Such a dialogue will have to be nested in the larger context of 'Defence' that takes into consideration the imperatives of resource allocation based on priorities of the political leadership.

FORCE APPLICATION

The application of the military instrument towards achievement of political objectives is the domain where the interaction is closer and direct between the political and military leadership. Being a nuclear power, the idea that once political objectives are outlined, the military has full operational freedom to accomplish its tasks is no longer valid. The political leadership through the CDS may have to impose constraints on force application especially in terms of targets that cannot be engaged without prior concurrence of the political leadership. The CDS also wearing the hat of the PC-COSC will have to arbitrate and harmonise the effort of the three services.

THE HUMAN CAPITAL CHALLENGE

Whether it is shaping, maintaining or applying the military instrument, the quality and successful outcome of interaction between the military, the civilian bureaucracy, and the political leadership is heavily dependent on the human capital that has to undertake the heavy lifting of research, analysis, policy recommendations and strategy formulation. Thus, populating the newly created DMA with domain expertise will be a challenging exercise that demands reengineering the existing staffing regulations of the MoD. Since institutional capacity is founded on the quality of human capital, the DMA could be a major game changer only if it is populated with the best available human capital that is equipped to fulfil the functions that it has been mandated. The functions include the Indian Army (IA), Indian Navy (IN) and Indian Air Force (IAF); the integrated headquarters comprising the IA, IN, IAF and Integrated Defence Staff; the Territorial Army; works relating to the IA, IN and IAF; procurement exclusive to the services except capital acquisitions; promoting 'jointness' in procurement, training and staffing for the services; and the restructuring of military commands for optimal resource use through jointness in operations, including through establishing joint/theatre commands and promoting use of indigenous equipment by the services.

TACKLING EXPERTISE AND TENURE DEFICIT

Largely, the functions require expertise in military specific domains. Civilian expertise would also be required to handle issues like budgeting, revenue procurement, and human resource management inter alia. For the Armed Forces, the prime issue is whether sufficient serving armed forces officers have the expertise that are needed to function at the department level of the MoD. Importantly, would their career progression requirements allow for a five-year tenure which is the existing norm for the civil service cadres. In the existing cadre management system of the armed forces, a five-year tenure would be a tall order especially for the ranks above colonels and equivalent. Tackling this issue is feasible but would require crafting staffing rules that meet the twin objectives of sourcing the best expertise as well as ensuring tenures for at least five years.

A relevant model that could be emulated already exists in the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) since its inception in 1999. In the

NSCS model, the rules have been shaped to facilitate lateral induction of personnel on deputation from within the government but also caters for induction of persons with relevant expertise on 'contract' from outside the government. These can also be retired government employees or from the private sector. Provisions exist for extending tenures up to 10 years with the sanction of the relevant authorities. There is no age limit laid down for persons on contract.

One of the main challenges for the DMA is inducting suitable persons at the crucial levels of Additional Secretary and Joint Secretary. While weighted militarily, it should also include the IFS. A five-year tenure and domain expertise should be mandatory requirements for this. This combination will be difficult to meet by the existing staffing rules of the MoD. While tenure will not be a problem for the civil services, domain expertise will pose challenges and could be overcome presently only through lateral induction from outside the government by adopting the NSCS model. In the long run, a group should be created that has been trained in armed forces institutions.

The challenge for finding suitable two and three stars who can satisfy the tenure and domain expertise criteria is also daunting. At the two-star level, which equates to Joint Secretary, the problem will be the tension between tenure and career progression of the individual. Career progression requires fulfilling minimum Command appointment tenure and only after which can the individual be placed in the MoD. Except for the navy, where officers are promoted relatively early to two star, it may not be feasible to get a suitable two star for a five-year tenure as the individual might get approved for three star or be due for retirement and have to move out earlier. The situation for the three-star level is similar, as here again the IN might still be able to meet the five-year criteria but for the IA and IAF it will be very difficult. The problem at both levels can be overcome if the individuals are allowed to continue after retirement on contract by adopting the NSCS rules of staffing.

The process of staffing the DMA would have to be preceded by the identification of the directorates or portions thereof from the DoD to DMA. The identification will have to be based on the revised allocation of business rules and will require mature handling and should not be allowed to become a 'partition of assets' approach. Instead it should be guided by the need to fulfill the functional responsibility mandated to the departments. Staffing according to military rank structure also entails reconciling differences in rank equivalences with civil services.

CIVILIAN SERVICES DOMAIN EXPERTISE

The problem of domain expertise for the civil services cadre also need to be tackled as it has not been possible to create a dedicated civil services national security cadre that could be shifted around central and state level ministries dealing with security issues. Post Kargil, the task force headed by Arun Singh¹ that carried out the review of the Management of Defence had in its report of September 2000 recommended the following:

There is a need to establish infrastructure and mechanisms to provide formal orientation and training to leaders and defence managers from all disciplines engaged in the task of national security. Officers of the three services who are promotable to two star and three star, and officers at the level of Joint Secretary and Additional Secretary from MoD, MoD Finance, MEA, MHA and NSCS should be nominated for a four-week course, run twice a year by a visiting faculty drawn from the Services and Civil Services with the objective of conducting training in various aspects related to the joint prosecution of war.

The Services have been running such a programme but it is bereft of participation from the civil services.

The creation of DMA, however, provides another opportunity to induct a greater degree of domain expertise by making it mandatory for civil services officers deputed to MoD and especially the DMA, to have done professional courses at service institutions such as the National Defence College (NDC) or College of Defence Management (CDM) for Joint Secretary and above, and Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) for Director and below. Notably, though vacancies for civil services exist in courses being conducted at the NDC and DSSC, for more than five years there has been negligible participation by the India Foreign Service (IFS) at the NDC. There has been very few IFS or IAS officer at the DSSC for more than a decade. There is need to identify more civil and military training institutions to cross fertilise training so has to strengthen the bonds of civil and military personnel through enhancing the knowledge of the other. In particular, a greater utilisation of IFS cadre in MoD should also follow. Coupled with induction on contract with people from outside the government, as suggested earlier, the problem of domain expertise can be tackled.

CIVIL-MILITARY EQUIVALENCE

The problem of equivalence has remained unresolved in integrated organizations and pay commissions have accentuated the problem and inter-se seniority issues continue to vitiate the working environment. This issue will also haunt the DMA. Specifically, the problem emanates from the fact that the Lt Col/Col/Brig and equivalent ranks have no easy fit as Director/Deputy Secretary. Since the DMA cannot await the resolution of the larger issue of equivalence, adoption of flexible rules patterned on NSCS by resorting to contract employment instead of deputation, offers a way forward.

RE-ORIENTATION

There will be a need to reorient individuals to function as part of a department in the MoD. An induction capsule for the uniformed and civil service officers should be instituted that will familiarise them with the structural and functional aspects of the MoD and its mode of interaction with other ministries and departments of the government. Special emphasis would have to be laid on the various types of communications, procedures and formats based on the Central Secretariat Manual of Office Procedure.² Such a capsule can best be conducted through weekend workshops and undertaken by the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSAs) which is under the MoD.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of the DMA must follow a plan that must ensure that turbulence wrought by restructuring is minimised. Heads of departments especially the Defence Secretary and the CDS have to quickly establish a healthy working relationship that must privilege the smooth implementation. While the initial process must concentrate on the restructuring and regrouping of segments based on the assigned functional responsibilities, the CDS must also focus on ensuring that the DMA is populated with the highest quality of human capital with the requisite expertise and who would also have a reasonable length of tenure. Being the Head of Department, the CDS can initiate the Cabinet Note that makes the case for modifying the Staffing Rules for the DMA. This is an essential step that will have a long term positive impact on the effective functioning of the DMA. Hopefully, the DMA should improve civil-military relations whose singular purpose is to shape an effective

military instrument. Quality of human capital would be the key which will require going beyond the existing staffing regulations.

NOTES

1. See <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf>, accessed on 13 March 2020.
2. See https://darpg.gov.in/sites/default/files/CSMOP_0_0.pdf, accessed on 13 March 2020.