

Jointness in Armed Forces and Institution of Post of Chief of Defence Staff are Mutually Exclusive

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Interestingly the very first issue of “Journal of Defence Studies” published by Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in August 2007 decided to focus on the subject of “Jointness in Indian Armed Forces”. There are possibly many more pressing issues impinging on the Indian Armed Forces and National Security, but apparently they were not considered for one reason or the other. “Jointness” was given pride of place as the first topic to be discussed. It was also somewhat surprising that the vast majority of articles in the Journal argued, with palpable passion, that the institution of the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was essential for greater efficiency of the Armed Forces and the inculcation of desired jointness. The arguments presented in favour of the institution of CDS are one sided and as a consequence exclude the other possibilities for achieving jointness and efficiency in the armed forces of India. There was no article that represented a view that jointness is desirable but it is premature to think of a CDS at present or that the institution of CDS will be counter productive. Also, it is worth noting, as mentioned by many authors in the journal, that although the Group of Ministers recommended the creation of an Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) to be headed by a CDS in 2001, the then Prime Minister Vajpayee accepted the establishment of the IDS but postponed the appointment of the CDS. The situation remains the same today even after a new government under a different Prime Minister came to power in 2004. The IDS is headed by Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC) and reports to the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). Thus, two Prime Ministers have not deemed it fit to institute a CDS. This cannot be without good reason.

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It is worth noting that there are a number of individuals who are of the conviction that a CDS will cause more harm than good. Their views have as much validity as those of the proponents of the CDS concept; points of view that deserve to be aired concurrently for obtaining a more balanced approach to the subject. Again, in spite of the fact that any number of Army Chiefs have ardently supported the establishment of a CDS, the last Army Chief to retire categorically stated that he did not recommend the creation of a CDS for the next 10 to 15 years. General J. J. Singh's considered views should be taken seriously as he was closely associated with the functioning of the IDS during his career. Yet, the proponents never tire of raising the issue over and over again.

This article will argue that the institution of CDS is neither necessary nor sufficient for achieving true jointness among the services. True jointness, however, is a desirable objective and this article will attempt to give an alternate approach to the subject.

We live in an age of specialisation. Jointness is indeed a laudable concept. Operational efficiency and effectiveness, however, should not be sacrificed at the altar of supposed jointness. It is a moot point whether it is desirable to impose if it undermines the very rationale it is meant to support. It has been often stated by the proponents of the CDS system that the concept of integrated defence staff had to be imposed from outside of the armed forces in a number of countries notably in the United Kingdom. Every country has a unique set of problems that demand individual solutions. The same is valid for India. In our case, unfortunately, we have adopted a system of questionable suitability. For instance, the manning of posts in the IDS has been reduced to a system of quotas for each service; and we have insisted on manning of appointments in the senior ranks on a rotational basis irrespective of the type of experience required and demands of the job. This situation highlights the absence of desired jointness in our armed forces. It can be argued that jointness in some form has been ensured, but are the results optimal? The answer is no. Turf battles, career prospect issues, continue to undermine the progress towards the institutionalisation of

jointness. As an aside, a senior officer working with the IDS when asked whether the IDS functioning was ensuring better jointness among the armed forces actually questioned whether there was any jointness within the IDS itself! A sad commentary on the state of affairs. It stands to reason that the most suitable person available should be selected for important appointments. This entails experience and on the job training in preparation for the tasks ahead. It is granted that some jobs require little specific specialisation. However, the more important ones do need training and preparation. One option, possibly the best option, is to adopt the system of lead service for different tasks and clearly spell out roles and missions for each service. The roles and missions should be expressly stated, without ambiguity and repetition, and formalised. This will hopefully put an end to turf battles and bring about jointmanship more readily. More importantly, the responsibility and accountability of different services should be unambiguously articulated. This cannot but have a salutary effect. Unfortunately, although the IDS has been in existence for well over six years, the subject has not received the priority it deserves. In the opinion of the author, finalisation of roles and missions is more important than the institution of a CDS. It is also opined that if the services are unwilling to tie themselves to detailed responsibilities under the present dispensation, the creation of a CDS will not help solve the problem. On the other hand, unless we establish responsibilities and accountabilities, jointmanship will remain elusive. The CDS system, as envisaged in the GOM report, places operational responsibility on the CDS but training and operational responsibilities on the service chiefs—an arrangement ill suited for ensuring unambiguous responsibilities and clear accountability. It should also be noted that establishing roles and missions and designating lead service for different tasks can be done by the armed forces themselves without recourse to Government of India orders. If it were to be done, it would be an example of true jointmanship, a far better alternative than a fiat issued that does not represent all shades of opinion.

In the six odd years of IDS functioning, inter alia, a Joint Doctrine has been issued, and some procedural aspects and organisational channels

have been worked out. Possibly the most notable achievement is the support given to the procurement process. This has been largely facilitated by the introduction by the Ministry of Defence of a more streamlined and effective Defence Procurement Procedure. However, the working out of priorities has been left to the individual services. A Joint Service prioritisation of procurement that is acceptable to all is still some distance away. The major task of a “purple staff” ought to be to work on required force levels and make recommendations to the COSC on how the Defence Budget should be distributed amongst the services. In fact, in an ideal “joint” situation, there should be only one Defence Budget without subdivision to the respective services. In the absence of stated responsibilities and requirements of future conflicts, a judicious allocation of the Defence Budget is unlikely to have tri-service concurrence. A CDS would also find it extremely difficult to take the responsibility of allocations in the “Defence Budget” over the clamour for funds by the individual services.

Emphasis on the procurement process is well placed, but the process is neither the beginning nor the end of operational capability. The basis of purchases needs to be defined with greater clarity. A good beginning would be to first define, in reasonably cogent terms, the possible and probable types of conflict situations that we are likely to face and the requirements for success. The Services have often complained that the possible threats and tasks should be spelt out by the government. This is unlikely to happen and the Services will have to decide on the threats themselves, hopefully in coordination with other elements involved in national security. In fact, this is as it should be. A joint service organisation like the IDS should take on this task. It is opined that an IDS attempt to establish the threats and opportunities will bolster jointmanship. It will actually represent officers of the three services working together in concert. The experience will be invaluable. Thereafter, the extant capabilities of the armed forces acting independently or in unison should be worked out. It is only afterwards that the planning of defence expenditure can be judiciously attempted. In this system, the analysis of extant capability could pose problems in the absence of a yardstick

for estimating capabilities. The process will be facilitated if the roles and missions have been established. Even if individual services are unwilling to spell out their capabilities, the IDS on its own has the required expertise to work out a fair estimate that would be suitable for planning purposes. The procurement process would thereafter be based on logic and rationality. It can also be stated with some confidence that a serious IDS effort to systematically work towards recommending a desired force structure will support and further jointness in a far more acceptable manner than an attempt to impose jointness. The procedure given above is somewhat simplistic. In real life there will be many hurdles and uncertainties but the recommended system, in principle, has considerable merit and should be tried. More importantly, the results will improve with experience. With a considerably better analysis of what we can expect, the demands on intelligence information required in terms of content, repetition etc., can be better established. The importance of good and timely intelligence cannot be over emphasised.

It has often been stated that, in modern conflict, joint conduct of operations is essential to bring about the needed synergy. A caveat may be in order. A single service operation is a valid operation of war and, at times, will be the option of choice. Similarly, occasions could arise where one service or the other is not actively involved in the combat. Again, the relative importance of the role played by different services could vary markedly. All these aspects will take on adverse significance if they are not preceded by joint planning. Joint planning is not a mere phrase or a one-time activity but is a way of life. It has to be a continuous process before and during conflicts. It is the experience of the author that effective joint planning is seldom carried out in peacetime; at best an outline plan is discussed, often with considerable rancour. However, once the shooting war starts, the differences among the services tend to disappear and the war is fought under a readily agreed plan or set of plans. Towards the end of the war, jointness is again given short shrift in the interest of claims and counter claims, accusations and counter accusations, and in attempts to cover mistakes made. Jointness is not one of our strong points. It is again iterated that the desired jointness

cannot be imposed except as a peace time exercise. In war, jointness is required not only in the higher direction of war but at every level of combat. An understanding needs to be fostered that jointness is in everyone's interest and must be attempted. Possibly, this understanding can be better achieved if the responsibilities of the actors are well defined and the requirement to continuously hone the plan based on better training or capabilities is formalised as a system. The planning team could also advise some alterations in training schedules. A part of the IDS has been established for this purpose on a full time basis and they must be tasked to carry out such planning on a continuous basis. The results of their efforts can then be discussed with those involved in the actual conduct of operations to continuously better the product. There is a possible disconnect in that those charged with the conduct of actual operations would much rather do their own planning and be responsible for it. This is a valid argument but the object is not to interfere in the planning for operations by the combat elements but to support them with studies and information to make their planning more scientific. The IDS should recognise that they perform a support or staff function and must not dictate to those charged with and accountable for the actual conduct of operations. A similar pattern should be followed in planning for contingencies and national calamities. Any attempts to portray the IDS as a quasi-superior formation can only be counter productive. It is a well known truism that authority without accountability cannot but lead to bad results. The IDS should have a selfless approach to work towards greater understanding and jointness amongst the armed forces. Such jointness will be based on recognition of need and is likely to be more enduring than attempts to impose jointness by the introduction of the institution sometimes referred to as the "military czar"—the phrase has many avoidable connotations.

It will be seen from the discussion so far that the IDS has an important role to play as long as it is intended to support the functioning of the individual services. Honest attempts in this direction will foster jointness. However, it is often argued, by those wedded to the institution of a CDS, that without a head, the IDS cannot function as well as it should. In fact

the CISC does report to the Chairman COSC, who becomes the essential link between the services and the tri-service support or staff organisation. Three other arguments put forth are that the Chairman COSC finds it difficult to wear two hats, the Chairman is rotated very often, and that a CDS will be more impartial in effecting agreements amongst the services. To this writer, all three arguments appear somewhat specious. As it is, the Chairman COSC does wear two hats. Heading the IDS should not be an onerous task given that the IDS is manned by as many as six three star appointments and over a dozen two star officers. The essential task of the Chairman COSC therefore is to guide and oversee the functioning of the IDS—not an onerous task. In fact, as he is the head of a Service, he is in a better position to guide the functioning of the IDS without over extending himself. Similarly, although it would be better if the Chairman COSC were not to be rotated too often, the impact of more frequent rotations should not be too serious. The CISC is invited to COSC deliberations and the Chairman COSC should, without exception, keep his counterparts from the other two services abreast of the functioning of IDS and the initiatives being progressed. In any case, the functioning of the IDS should interest all three service chiefs in near like measure. Thus a somewhat faster rotation of the Chairman COSC should not adversely affect the functioning of the IDS. On the critical question of impartiality of the CDS, the very thought casts avoidable aspersions. All Chiefs are equally responsible for national security, and their impartiality must be taken for granted. Differences in viewpoint are a healthy occurrence, generally arising out of different perceptions based on individual needs and experience. Such perceptions will tend to coalesce if the duties and responsibilities of individual services are formally established. It will also be beneficial if most decisions regarding inter service issues are taken at levels lower than that of the Chiefs. In any case, the CDS will also be a product of the same type of experiences as his counterparts and his perceptions are unlikely to be very different.

As per the current policy on the functioning of the CDS, when and if appointed, the CDS would have very limited operational responsibilities and it would be incorrect to place him as “*primus inter pares*” over the

service Chiefs who are charged with training and command of forces in combat. It would be akin to a staff appointment getting pride of place over an operational billet at the same level—an anachronism. For the same reason, operational recommendations of the CDS would be misplaced as he would be neither responsible nor accountable for the results of his recommendations. Hence, either the CDS would be just filling a slot or, if he wants to be active, his recommendations are likely to be challenged by one Chief or the other. In either case, it will represent a retrograde step as far as jointness is concerned.

The CDS, when and if appointed, would also be responsible to provide the single point of military advice to the CCS/RM. It is difficult to imagine how a CDS who is not “hands on” in command of forces can give sound advice relative to or concerning the operational services. More often than not the CDS would be hard pressed to commit forces or address the capabilities of any of the services, particularly the services other than the service whose uniform he wears. Even for advice impinging on his own parent service, the Chief of the service could and would take offence at someone else taking decisions regarding his service. A “super Chief” will be far from welcome. Hence such advice rendered by the CDS would have to be based on either conjecture or second hand information that could lead to some difficulty in a detailed discussion on facts and capabilities. If the decisions are not *ex parte*, the value of the “single point of military advice” becomes increasingly questionable. An avoidable additional level would have been created that will result in neither better jointness, nor better and timely advice. The appointment of the CDS is not a panacea for all ills inflicting the armed forces—in fact quite the opposite. A CDS will add to the ills. A commitment to jointmanship is not synonymous with a commitment to the post of CDS.

Undoubtedly, future wars are likely to be faster using advanced technology. The old system of war fighting may not be adequate. Much greater cohesion is called for. Towards this end, the IDS has an important role to aid and support operational requirements and needs.

If IDS functioning is restricted to support rather than a propensity to impose, there is a fair chance that better jointness will result. Jointness can also be furthered with clear and formalised roles and missions for the three services. The use of space, communications, Infowar etc will shape the conflict arena and it is strongly recommended that a lead service be appointed for each such area with the IDS providing staff support. Once again jointness would be given a boost. More importantly, a healthy and frequent interaction between the IDS and the services should be encouraged at all levels. Moreover, a formalised system of near continuous inter service planning organisation for war, aspects of war involving two or more services, and a host of contingencies that could arise should be established with staff support from the IDS.

The IDS can be a worthy tool to bring about jointness. However, its tasks and functioning should be better nuanced. A good starting point of reforming the functioning of the IDS would be to audit its functioning over the last six years and more with a view to study the impact of the IDS on jointness and how to achieve better cohesion amongst the services. The recommendations made in this paper should be considered. Unless jointness has been achieved to a considerable degree, it will be premature to even think of the institution of a CDS, leave alone his job description. 