

Harmonising Military–Bureaucracy Relations in Defence Ministry: Some Thoughts

Rajneesh Singh

In India, service officers and civil bureaucracy share a very delicate relation, which many in the military find skewed unfavourably towards the bureaucracy. It is perceived that instituting the appointment of single-point military advisor would help to mitigate, to a great extent, the said problem besides making the military operationally efficient and administratively effective. Instituting the appointment of single-point military advisor is imperative but, equally important are accompanying reforms in the defence architecture and its systems and processes to make the appointment and the defence establishment effective. The necessity or otherwise of instituting the appointment of single-point military advisor has been widely debated. However, the issues concerning the ‘hows and whys’ of the functioning of the appointment and the relationship he would share with the Defence Secretary have not received adequate attention. This article attempts to fill this void by articulating a viewpoint.

Colonel **Rajneesh Singh** is an Infantry officer and has served as a military observer in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (from 2003 to 2004).

NB: The views expressed in this article are those of the author in his personal capacity and do not carry any personal endorsement.

Many countries in the world follow the ‘CDS model’ and India can gain from the study of those models. This chapter has benefitted from the study of the British and the Australian models. An attempt has been made to define the possible role, responsibilities, and authority of the single-point military advisor and the Defence Secretary and the possible relationship the two can share, to suit unique requirements of India’s defence establishment.

India’s Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) and Higher Defence Management (HDM) systems are in urgent need of reforms. Although, the necessity to reform the system was felt soon after it was conceptualised after independence, it was the Kargil war which provided the necessary impetus. The Group of Ministers (GoM), instituted after the war, had carried out a holistic study of India’s security system and made some very valid recommendations. Many of those recommendations have been implemented. Of the various recommendations made by the GoM, two significant recommendations which have not been implemented are, instituting the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the restructuring of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The necessity of having a single-point military advisor to the government, either in the form of a CDS or a Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), has been felt since the 1950s. However, for a variety of reasons, the appointment has not been instituted till date. The various interest groups of India’s defence establishment, the elected representatives, the civil bureaucracy and the military officers have at some time or the other opposed the institution of the appointment. Of late, the three constituents of the HDO seem to have arrived at some consensus, although there is no clarity regarding the nature, the form or the time frame for instituting the appointment, from any authoritative source.

The necessity of reforming the HDO has been debated *ad nauseam*. There are three main issues of concern, among many, which are relevant

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to the subject of this article. First is the manner in which the concept of civilian supremacy has been distorted, resulting in imprecise and indeterminate definition of duties of bureaucrats and military officers. Many analysts have even gone to the extent of opining that the civil bureaucracy seems to enjoy authority and responsibility without corresponding accountability.¹ Second, due to the hierarchal nature of the defence establishment, many in the uniformed fraternity feel that the elected representatives are not as easily accessible as they would prefer. Third, Defence Secretary is responsible to the Defence Minister for the provision of advice on most matters concerning defence policy and for management of defence resources. The Secretary and civilian staff officers chair most of the defence committees, have privileged access to the minister and to the information flowing to and from the minister, and tend to serve in key positions much longer than either military officers or the minister. These three issues, in the opinion of some senior military officers, have a negative impact on the operational preparedness of the services and management functions. This state of affairs has been variously described, even termed as imbalance in civil–military equilibrium.² Equilibrium between the military and civil service officers in India's defence establishment is the state which is aimed to be achieved by vesting in appointments authority and responsibility proportional to accountability and is a function of the position they hold in the warrant of precedence. In addition, the state of equilibrium is a function of selection of 'best service and person for the job'. Equilibrium between civil bureaucracy and service officers is also a function of the nature of their professional interaction, as a result of their respective positions in the organisational structure. It is distinct from 'equality', which is uni-dimensional and represents the sense of being equal.³ There is a sense of consensus amongst the uniformed fraternity that instituting the appointment of the single-point military advisor would help to mitigate, to a great extent, the problems discussed earlier. It is the case of this article

that instituting the appointment is imperative but, equally important are accompanying reforms in the organisational structure of the HDO and its systems and processes. There have been very lively debates in India on the necessity or otherwise of the appointment of the single-point military advisor. The debates, however, have not deliberated much on issues regarding the ‘hows and whys’ of the functioning of the appointment or the relationship he would share with the Defence Secretary. This article attempts to fill this void by articulating, a viewpoint, about possible role, responsibilities and authority of the single-point military advisor and the Defence Secretary and the possible relationship the two can share in defence organisation described hereunder.⁴

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The reforms to India's HDO is inevitable, it is a matter of time. This article is based on the hypothesis that the appointment of the single-point military advisor would be accompanied by or will be followed by structural reforms to India's HDO. It is a challenge to deliberate on the functioning of the appointment when the status of reforms itself is unclear. An attempt, however, is being made to deliberate on these very issues based on a presumptive HDO. For the purpose of this essay, in the hypothesized HDO, the offices of the senior-most military officer and the civil bureaucrat will form part of the MoD. The structural reforms will also integrate the three Service HQs, headed by their respective chiefs, with the MoD to form three of its departments. The CDS in the reformed organisation would head the three services and all the organisations responsible for planning and allocating resources, management of defence, and provision of strategic direction to military operations. The single-point military advisor will be assisted in his duties by the reformed HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS). The Defence Secretary, in the reformed defence organisation, will head departments and branches responsible for policy formulation and

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financial planning. The various branches within the MoD, in the reformed structure, will be jointly staffed by civil and military officers. This article also hypothesises that the government may initially institute the appointment of the Permanent Chairman of the COSC. However, the final objective is to have the appointment of the CDS at the helm of the three services.⁵ The earlier suggested structural reforms would mandate the government to formally articulate the rules for interaction between the civil bureaucracy and the military officers including between the heads of the two services. It is under these set of conditions that an attempt is being made to define the role and tasks of two very important executives of the Government of India.

The organizational structure of the defence establishment and the relationship between the Defence Minister, Defence Secretary and the senior-most military officer, in the proposed organisation, will be unique and without any parallel to any other relationship in any other department of the government. This is so because the department will have, the CDS and the Defence Secretary, sharing responsibilities of the MoD, while in all other departments the Secretary is solely responsible to the Minister, for the working of the department.

Concept of Relationship Between the Chief of Defence Staff and Defence Secretary

It is proposed that the relationship between the two appointments should be so defined that it harnesses the complementary abilities of the two services, the military and the civil bureaucracy, to achieve the desired objectives of the government. The complementary abilities should enable the CDS to exercise unfettered focus to command the

three services while the Defence Secretary is made responsible for provision of resources, making policy, and accountability functions of the department.⁶ The division of responsibilities between the CDS and the Defence Secretary has to be reviewed in the context that the CDS will be the operational commander of the Armed Forces and the Defence Secretary will be the ‘enabler’ for the Armed Forces. The CDS and the Defence Secretary as co-leaders of the department will have specific, unequal, and overlapping responsibilities.

In order to achieve the desired end-state, this article recommends that the CDS be designated as the ‘principal military advisor’ and the Defence Secretary as the ‘principal defence advisor’ to the government. The offices of the two appointments should be co-located in the defence establishment and the two appointments be permitted equal and similar access to the Defence Minister. The two appointments are recommended to be designated as ‘lead appointments’ in their respective areas of competencies and for some tasks they should share joint responsibilities. In the case of joint responsibilities, the staff below them should report to them equally. The two appointments would thus have similar and equal access to the staff below them and to the Defence Minister above. As postulated earlier, equal and similar access to the Defence Minister, MoD staffed by civil and military officers to support the two appointments, and co-location of their offices in the ministry would assist to a very large extent to achieve and maintain the equilibrium not only between the two appointments but also between the military officers and civil bureaucracy at large.

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relationship between the CDS and the Chiefs of the three Services. Institution of the appointment of the CDS would result in greater centralisation of authority of strategic policy-making, authority to allocate resources, and control of military operations in the appointment of the CDS. The appointment of the CDS, as is being envisaged, will lead to greater jointness amongst the three services, resulting in the establishments of joint command structures and increased focus on joint operations. HQ IDS would be required to enhance its capacity to undertake integrated military planning. All this will augment the role and the responsibilities of the CDS at the expense of the chiefs. Many of the tasks which were earlier performed by the chiefs will now be undertaken by the CDS and the chiefs will become capability managers of their respective services.

Role and Responsibilities of Chief of Defence Staff, Defence Secretary, and Service Chiefs

The genesis of the appointments and the reforms being recommended in this article lie in the problems which have been identified and the lessons learnt from the various wars and conflict situations that India has been involved in and the various peace-time management issues. As referred earlier, the CDS will be responsible for developing and implementing the defence policy and the day-to-day management of the activities of the Armed Forces. The Defence Secretary will play the role of an enabler and will assist the Defence Minister to promulgate policies and earmark resources for the CDS to function. It is recommended that the role and responsibilities of the appointments and other facets of their functioning must be promulgated and prescribed in the Act of Parliament. Thereafter, should there be any requirement of clarification or amplifications to the Act, ministerial directives can be issued from time-to-time.

Chief of Defence Staff

The CDS shall be the commander of India's Armed Forces. In this capacity, he shall exercise command and control over the three services, plan and conduct military operations, and raise joint organisations. As a single-point military advisor to the government, the CDS will be responsible to tender advice on military implications of strategic developments, on military strategy and development of capabilities and disposition of the Armed Forces. The CDS will be the Permanent Chairman of the COSC. The officer will also be responsible for leading relationship with the Armed Forces of friendly foreign countries.

Defence Secretary

The Defence Secretary will be the principal defence advisor to the government. His primary responsibilities will include policy formulation and financial planning. He will be responsible for financial planning and programming of all elements of defence outlay, and financial administration and control of expenditure. The Defence Secretary will provide policy advice to the Defence Minister, will be responsible to interact with other government departments, and will be personally responsible to the Parliament for the economic, efficient, and effective use of defence resources. He will also be responsible for the organisation, management and staffing of the defence establishment.

Joint Responsibilities of CDS and Defence Secretary

The two appointments will be jointly responsible for strategic assessment, long-term capability planning and liaison with other departments on security matters. The officers will also be jointly responsible for the promotion and postings of senior officers of major general (equivalent) rank and above.

Service Chiefs

As a result of the reforms being recommended, there will be redistribution of the roles and responsibilities amongst the CDS, the Chiefs and some of the newly created senior appointments. The Chiefs, as a result of reforms,

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will become advisors of their respective services to the CDS. They will be capability managers responsible for raising, training, introducing and sustaining equipment and personnel and will also be responsible for ethos, morale, etc., for their service.

Likely Areas of Discord

The articulation of the concept of relationship and the roles and responsibilities of the appointments is the first step at demystifying and reforming the organisation. This attempt may sound simplistic, but can become labyrinthine and can befuddle the decision-makers when translating the concept into directions. The distribution of authority between the CDS and the Defence Secretary cannot be mathematical and will always be open to criticism by one interest group or the other. Discussed in the following paragraphs are some of the issues which have the potential to cause discord. No readymade solutions are being offered and it may be worth its while for the reforms committee to deliberate on the issues to obviate problems in the future.

Clarity in Role and Tasking

Even though it may seem that the distribution of duties between the appointments is straight forward; some may feel the asymmetry when the authority is actually exercised. The CDS will be responsible for the command of the Armed Forces of India including combat support arms and services. The chiefs are being envisaged to be the capability managers of their respective services while the Defence Secretary is being recommended for provision of resources to the Armed Forces. The military may stake claim that the logistics, force development, and resource allocation are the rightful prerogative of the CDS as the commander of force, while the Defence Secretary may also forward similar assertion as the chief 'enabler' of the Armed Forces. There is a potential for conflict of interest between the appointments and their staffs, if there is lack of clarity and common

understanding of the issues involved. The reforms team will have to clearly demarcate responsibilities of the appointments in this regard.

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Policy Advisor versus Military Commander

The CDS as the military commander would be expected to operate under the limits of the approved policy of the government and subject to the resources allocated. The Defence Secretary is likely to play a lead role in policy formulation and resource allocation although the CDS would be expected to provide inputs on the subject. This to some may seem like the dominance of the Defence Secretary and his staff necessitating deliberation by the decision-makers.

Dominance of the Civil Bureaucracy

The nature of the role and task may dictate that the key policy advisory committees are either chaired by the Defence Secretary or his representatives. It is also likely that the agenda of the committees will also be set and controlled by the civil bureaucracy. In all possibility, the Defence Minister is likely to get involved in the process of policymaking towards the very end and all the issues of disagreement may not be put up to him, by the concerned appointments, in the manner desired by other stakeholders. Moreover, the minister may not have the time or the resources or inclinations to study all aspects of disagreement. All these are issues which require deliberation before the reforms are finalised.

Career Management of Civil Bureaucrats

Another issue which has the potential for discord would be the decision on the career management of senior military officers and civil bureaucrats. At present the promotions and postings of senior military officers are vetted by the civil bureaucracy in the MoD. Subsequent to the integration of civil and military officers in the various branches of the MoD, the assertion that the CDS and military officers have similar authority in relation to civilian staff is likely to be an issue which may cause consternation in the civil bureaucracy.

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Senior Civilian and Military Officers

In the Indian Army, there is a system wherein in certain appointments of combat support arms and services are answerable on certain aspects of their job profile to two different 'bosses', viz., to their seniors in chain of command and to the seniors of their own arm or service. This is reflected in the annual confidential reports where there is provision for technical reporting in addition to the chain of command reporting. In the reformed

higher defence system, when integration of civil and military officers takes place and the CDS and the Defence Secretary are made jointly responsible for some of the tasks, there may be a case for a similar arrangement wherein officers of both civil and military services are made responsible and responsive to two different appointments. The extent of the authority of the senior to discipline, conditions of service, etc., is a subject of greater deliberation. Informal procedures and mechanisms may also have to be designed to facilitate mutual consultation and reconciliation of the views of the stakeholders.

Conclusion

India's defence architecture and its systems and processes were designed in 1947 to suit the requirements of the time. Ever since there have been remarkable changes in the geo-strategic situation which have increased the security challenges for the country. The country's economy has improved significantly raising the educational standard of the citizens. As a result, citizens today are notably more security conscious and expect nothing but the best from the government. The media too has played its part in informing the citizens of the various shortcomings of the defence establishment including the poor health of civil–military relations. It is time for the government to bite the proverbial bullet and initiate the last mile reforms and institute the appointment of the CDS and integrate the three service HQs with the MoD. Cross-postings of civil and military officers in the various branches of the MoD is another area of reforms whose time has come.

The recommendations in this article are based on the study of models of western Armed Forces, where the governance system is very similar to the one followed in India. The parent models, which are the source of inspiration for this article, have their fair share of criticism and have been cited for some of the problems besetting their respective security establishments. No system in the world is ideal or perfect. In the absence of any credible and creative alternatives, it will do well for India to try some of the tested ideas and reform its HDO.

Notes

1. K. Subrahmanyam, in many of his writings highlighted the issues concerning the HDO, the ills and the possible solutions to those problems. He once described Indian HDO as one where ‘politicians enjoy power without any responsibility, bureaucrats wield power without any accountability and the military assumes responsibility without any direction’. See Anit Mukherjee, ‘Civil–Military Relations in Crisis’, Center for Advanced Study of India, 24 September 2012, available at <http://casi.ssc.upenn.edu/iit/mukherjee>
2. Rajneesh Singh, ‘Equilibrium in Higher Defence Organisation and the Need for Restructuring’, *Journal of Defence Studies*, 2016, 10(2), 19-37.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
4. The UK started the process to reform its HDO immediately after World War II and designed the ‘CDS model’. Australia an ally of the western block studied the US and the UK model, their provisions and devised its own version of the ‘CDS model’. The recommendations in this chapter have largely been inspired by the British and the Australian model of the HDO with modifications to suit unique Indian conditions.
5. In the aftermath of the Kargil war the government set up a GoM on 17 April 2000 to review the National Security System. The GoM Report on Management of Defence contains 75 recommendations which include instituting the appointment of the CDS. According to the recommendations, the CDS once appointed would be single point military advisor to the government. He would be responsible for the administrative control of the Strategic Forces and to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process through intra and inter-Service prioritization. The CDS when appointed would be a four star officer from one of the three Services in rotation and would function as the Permanent Chairman of the COSC. He would rank *primus inter pares* in the COSC and function as the ‘Principal Military Adviser’ to the Defence Minister. The GoM envisaged the appointment of the CDS as a first step in a series of structural reforms to be implemented incrementally. With time and experience further refinements and changes in HDO and systems and processes were expected to follow.
6. The concept has been derived from the speech of Dr Allan Hawke, Defence Secretary (1999-2002), to Royal United Services Institute of Australia on 1 May 2000.