

A promise of reform

After many false starts, the BJP government issued an order on Wednesday which could lead to the undertaking of the much-awaited higher defence reforms. The formation of a high-powered Defence Planning Committee (DPC) under the chairmanship of National Security Advisor Ajit Doval with a well-defined mandate is a significant step by the government in its final year. A permanent body, comprising the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), service chiefs, Defence Secretary, Foreign Secretary and Secretary (expenditure) in the Finance Ministry, it will prepare a draft national security strategy besides undertaking a strategic defence review and formulating an international defence engagement strategy. Considering the past record of the government appointed committees on national security whose reports lie buried deep inside official vaults, this move is bound to be met with scepticism. But the new committee holds promise and significance in its conception and charter.

First and foremost, the DPC is a permanent institutional mechanism with a specified charter which means that it not only can make recommendations, but can also follow up on their implementation. This takes care of the biggest lacuna in the reports produced so far by high-powered committees, which are usually full of retired officials with little authority in government. The DPC has top bureaucrats from three important ministries, and is chaired by the NSA who is backed by the PM's political mandate. Bringing these officials together on one platform can obviate the usual bureaucratic problem of important issues being moved on file only, to be debated in silos in different ministries.

Over the years, the national security setup has come under enormous criticism where the defence services are perceived to be cut off from the diplomatic initiatives of the government and ignorant of budgetary resources. If nothing else, this new committee should help the armed forces prioritise their procurement plans to reflect diplomatic and financial realities. The DPC would also give the armed forces an institutional role in higher policy formulation, which has been lacking so far. But over-dependence on such a high-powered committee to achieve defence planning goals also carries the danger of over-centralisation of national security initiatives in one official, the NSA. This personality-centric decision-making may not be healthy in a democratic system where the government is accountable to the citizens through Parliament. National security is too important to be left to the generals alone. Or to the bureaucrats. Or solely to the NSA.

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