

CAN A CDS ACT AS A CATALYST FOR FURTHER DEFENCE REFORMS?

Relevant for: Science & Technology | Topic: Defence related developments

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement from the ramparts of the Red Fort that India will soon have a Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) is a welcome step and reflects a multi-sectoral urgency within the government to initiate reform. To be honest, this writer had earlier been sceptical about such a measure because of the fear that it would be a piecemeal step without any accompanying change in the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

While the previous dispensations did not display the seriousness and political will needed to view the military as a tool of statecraft, this government's approach seems to be different. The close involvement of the political leadership, ever since the cross-border strikes into Myanmar, in the military's operational matters has probably given it a bird's-eye view of the necessary reforms.

Further, even while acknowledging the military's contribution to national security, Mr. Modi has often expressed concerns about the lack of synergy within the armed forces — not to the media, but directly to the senior leadership of the forces at the Unified Commanders' Conference.

The three services, on their part, have been involved in sparring for space in this debate by protecting their respective turfs and trying to orchestrate some middle-level reform. Here again, this writer has repeatedly argued that to be effective, a top-down approach to defence reform is the only forward.

So, will the CDS be a glorified Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, or will he be an empowered bridge between the military and the political leadership? Will the government be bold enough to immediately assign him operational responsibilities in a phased manner, or will it follow an incremental approach of first entrusting him with issues such as acquisitions, training and policy? Will there be an accompanying reform in the MoD? These are among the questions that merit serious reflection. It also needs to be assessed whether the military ecosystem has kept pace with the rapid changes in warfare and geopolitics.

The demands and challenges confronting a CDS will be of the kind that the military leadership has never faced before. Balancing national interests, shedding his own service affiliations, and looking after the interests of all the three services will always be a tough act. He must also have the world view and political awareness necessary to engage with diverse stakeholders. As seen from the Western experience, this will happen only after years of joint-service assignments, an exposure to working with government and educational interludes in a military career.

India currently faces multiple security challenges. Ingrained with a mindset shaped by conflicts and face-offs on its land frontiers and near-continuous internal armed conflicts, India's security landscape has been naturally dominated by the Indian Army. Balancing this reality with a realisation that both maritime and air power are going to play an increasingly important role in India's rise as a leading power will be among the initial strategic challenges any CDS faces.

Whether the creation of CDS will lead to the creation of 'integrated theatre commands' is too early to predict. However, four of the immediate tasks for the CDS are: improving inter-services synergy and laying the road map for time-bound integration; attaining a seamless integration of the MoD with service headquarters; assuming the operational responsibilities for all tri-service

commands and agencies; and steering the creation of integrated battle groups for various contingencies as a precursor to validating the concept of theatre commands.

Cynics will argue that given the difficulties faced by the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff — who had been tasked with a large part of this mandate almost two decades ago — to push for reform at the desired pace, how will the CDS succeed? The simple answer is that, in India, only when political heft is attached to a strategic process will it deliver results. A classic example is the ongoing, politically driven, shift from a reactive and restrained form of deterrence to a more proactive and preventive form. Having bitten the bullet, the Modi government has the needed momentum to not just appoint a CDS, but to continue with a top-down reform of national security structures.

Arjun Subramaniam is a retired Air Vice Marshal from the Indian Air Force and a visiting professor at Ashoka University

Support quality journalism - [Subscribe to The Hindu Digital](#)

Please enter a valid email address.

How an idea for a 'perfect Mumbai feature story' failed to materialise

Support The Hindu's new online experience with zero ads.

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

Crack