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Following up on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on August 15 to create the position of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), the government finalised the roles and responsibilities of the CDS, as prepared by a committee led by the National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval. The CDS will head the Department of Military Affairs, within the ministry of defence, while being the permanent chairman of the chiefs of staff committee. The appointment of the CDS is a big leap forward for India's national security apparatus. First proposed almost two decades ago, its merit has never been contested, yet it has not got operationalised till now. PM Modi has displayed boldness and the step is welcome. But the hard part begins now.

The CDS' first task will be to lead the integration of the different services, who have operated in silos, have got embroiled in inter-services disputes, and have been reluctant to let go of their own institutional interests. The CDS will have to build trust between the three services, and then use that to push for greater integration and jointness in training, capabilities, acquisitions, operations and planning. The nature of threats has changes with the newer technologies; so has the nature of warfare where distinctions between land, air and waters, and now cyber, are blurred. Ensuring India's forces are prepared is now the CDS' job, along with that of the respective service chiefs.

The second core challenge for the CDS is to become an effective link between the services and the civilian bureaucracy, for the relationship has been mired in distrust. Being housed within the ministry will help. The services are resentful that those who lack expertise and experience take all the decisions, while sitting in South Block, and ignore genuine concerns of the armed personnel. The bureaucrats see many demands of the services and the leadership as unreasonable, and believe that political control of the armed forces will inevitably mean administrative oversight. The CDS will have to mediate these relationships and ensure that all sides remain committed to the big picture — of making India secure, while the forces continue to operate under the democratic framework of civilian control.

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