

DECISIVE SHIFT: ON CHIEF OF DEFENCE STAFF

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The government has acted with reasonable alacrity to create the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), who will head the Department of Military Affairs (DMA). It was only four months ago, on August 15, that the Prime Minister stressed the importance of creating this post, whereas two Defence Ministers came and went after Manohar Parrikar promised that this move was very much on the government's agenda. To be fair, the delay has been more a result of fears in the minds of the three services — the Indian Army, Indian Navy and Indian Air Force — of how such a development could impact on the role and functioning of the three arms of the armed forces, in terms of curtailing or inflating their importance. There must have been a parallel thought in the bureaucracy how such a shift would affect them too. This move will install the CDS, in the rank of a four star general, as Secretary, DMA.

There is no doubt that the job of the CDS will be exceedingly challenging, a task which is easier set than done. The job calls for total transformation of traditional military mindset. The CDS has to restructure the military commands into appropriate theatre or joint commands for which a critical prerequisite is 'jointness' — a term that envisions the various arms of the armed forces working in unison towards a goal. This is a very tall order, considering India's experience. Since Independence, the armed forces have been working separately, with no concept of jointness. The only jointness that comes into play effectively is when officers of the various services go to courses in, say, Wellington, at the Defence Services Staff College, or at the National Defence College, Delhi. All that will have to change, and change quickly, for a variety of reasons, not least the security environment in the region, with the Americans preparing to move out of Afghanistan and the restiveness consequent to the dilution of Article 370. According to the cabinet release, the new incumbent will have three years to achieve this. It flows from this urgency therefore that the name of the next CDS will have to be soon announced. It is also necessary that the first incumbent is given a term of three years so as to be able to carry the ambitious vision laid out in the cabinet note through to its conclusion. The job is strategic, requires personal supervision, and cannot be left unfinished for the successor to finish. Given the challenges and the limited time-frame within which to accomplish it, allowances will have to be made for attendant hiccups.

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