

India's Wars Since Independence: Would We have Performed Better if We Had A Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)?

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Abstract

The appointment of a CDS for the Indian Armed Forces is the single most procrastinated decision of the political establishment. From perceived fear of a possible military takeover, to pure government antipathy, to the turf wars between the Services, the issue of CDS has been on the backburner.

The radical changes undertaken by the US to facilitate evolution of Joint Chief of Staff into an institutionalised structure is an excellent case study. The 'Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganisation Act' of 1986 completely transformed the US Armed Forces. India too had many opportunities where a CDS would have made an impact.

Sino-Indian 1962 War. *A CDS could have stymied the rampant political interference prevalent during that time. A Modus Vivendi and a functional arrangement at the highest level could have ensured that a 'clear, unambiguous and achievable' national aim could be enunciated. A CDS would have insisted that only a thorough bred professional is appointed as the Corps Commander to handle critical operations as also empower him to express his operational art. The decision of using offensive air power would have been arrived at after allaying the fears of political leadership.*

1965 Indo-Pak War. *A CDS could have advised the political leadership to use the IAF in offensive*

role against the Pakistani land forces in Rann of Kutch, prior to the war. He would have ensured that not only the Indian Navy's punch remained intact but also it could have been employed strategically as part of manoeuvre warfare. The operational importance of territories captured across the Line of Control could have been forcefully projected by a CDS to prevent handing them over back to Pakistan.

1971 Indo-Pak War. *General (later Field Marshal) Manekshaw was the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee, who emerged as the virtual CDS and had full faith and support of the government. However, a CDS would have incorporated views from all stakeholders before finalising the enemy's Centre of Gravity, a critical aspect of the war. He would have ensured that strategic targets are correctly identified as part of joint target list, ensured close coordination between IN and IAF and also resulted in better Identification of Friend or Foe (IFF) procedures.*

Kargil War. *CDS as part of NSC would have received timely and well analysed intelligence from multiple sources and could have employed every available national asset to verify and corroborate the inputs. A CDS with perspectives from all three Services and real time situational awareness from the battle front would have ensured seamless integration of all Services before approaching the CCS for decisions like employment of the Air Force.*

Conclusion

Military history is not only a reflection of the exploits and sacrifices of its armed forces in protecting the nation's integrity, but it is also a grim reminder to the political and military leadership to learn from its mistakes. India's Goldwater-Nichols moment has been long overdue. The question is who will ride the tiger?

Introduction

“Without a CDS India would be hoping to stage Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark”¹

The appointment of a CDS for the Indian Armed Forces is the single most procrastinated decision of the political establishment. From perceived fear of a possible military takeover, to pure government antipathy, to the turf wars between the Services, the issue of CDS has been kept on the backburner for a very long time. The issue remains the ‘numero uno’ factor in streamlining the Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) as part of the overall Indian national security apparatus revamp.

War at the national level is of coordination, orchestration and synchronisation of forces. The dire necessity for coordinated efforts by all elements of national power during war or otherwise is well understood. In most of the advanced democracies in the world, where civilian control over armed forces is completely established, the role of a single point military advisor to the highest political decision making entity of the state is institutionalised. In an extremely volatile neighbourhood and even after having fought many wars, Indian Armed Forces still do not have a CDS. Military history from a political context is the structured study of force application in furtherance of statecraft and state policy.² However, we surely have to learn from the most glaring, common and important lessons emerging from our own military history, and of others.

JOINT CHIEF OF STAFF (JCS): EVOLUTION IN US - A CASE STUDY

The radical changes undertaken by the US to facilitate evolution of JCS into an institutionalised structure is an excellent case study.

“The road, as I see it, stretches straight and with no turns.. The end, of course, must be the integration of every element of America’s defence in one department under one authoritative, responsible head. Call it the War Department or the Department of National Security

or what you will, just so it is one department.. One team with all the reins in one hand.. Under such a set-up another Pearl Harbour will not have to be feared.”³

Soon after the Pearl Harbour attack, President Roosevelt at the ‘Arcadia’⁴ conference in Washington established the Combined Chiefs of Staff as the supreme military body for strategic direction of the Anglo-American war effort.⁵ He created the Committee of US Staff Commanders to coordinate all operational strategy of its armed forces. This was established as the American component of the Combined Chiefs of Staff of Great Britain and the US. This group later came to be known as United States Joint Chiefs of Staff. It is interesting to note that President Roosevelt’s special military advisor, Admiral William D Leahy, was appointed to preside over the JCS, with the title of Chief of Staff to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy. Each member of the JCS was promoted to five star rank in December 1944.⁶ Although during the war it was an ad-hoc arrangement, in 1947 through the National Security Act, it was formally established as the United States JCS and also laid the foundation for future HDO of the US.

However, even after the National Security Act, there were shortcomings in Unified Command which manifested in several operational deficiencies during the Vietnam War, the Grenada operations and the Iranian hostage rescue attempt. The Grenada operations in particular brought the political focus into providing operational and administrative ‘independence’ to the Commander-in-Chiefs. These issues and many more such challenges necessitated the next round of reforms and resulted in the ‘Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganisation Act’ of 1986. This completely transformed the HDO of US into a truly joint structure with Unified Command and Control⁷. Therefore, it can be seen that the US learnt from its shortcomings through the Vietnam war, Grenada operations and Iranian hostage crisis, incorporated the necessary changes and transformed itself. Is India ready and heading towards its own ‘Goldwater-Nichols’ moment based on the lessons learnt from its previous wars?

ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S WARS THROUGH THE PRISM OF A 'NOTIONAL' CDS

Indian Armed Forces since independence have seen a myriad of operations covering various spectrums of warfare. However, for the purpose of this article only major wars have been included and the operation of Indo-Pakistan war of 1948 has been omitted as India did have a Commander-in-Chief in place then.

Sino-Indian 1962 War

The 1962 Sino-Indian war has been a watershed moment in independent India's history. The war exposed many a 'myth' which were so passionately pursued by the highest political leaders of the country. Except for raw courage displayed by the officers and men of Indian Army (IA) under inhospitable terrain and weather conditions, everything else related to India's Armed Forces was a disaster. *How could a CDS, if present have affected the course of the war in 1962?*

Stymie the Political Interference in Armed Forces. It was no secret that the Nehru-Menon duo had a huge influence on the military in the pre-1962 war era with absolutely no uniformed personnel offering any professional advice or counter views to those being advocated by the political masters. Although, there were Generals of the likes of Thimayya and SPP Thorat, even they couldn't stop the political inference on almost all aspects of military affairs.⁸ With increasing political interference, the ever powerful bureaucracy gained immense power which manifested in birth of subservient Generals. A CDS of the stature of General Thimayya could have forced the government to adopt a more professional way of handling the military and could have stymied the political interference to a large extent.⁹

Ensure Enunciation of Clear National Aims by Political Establishment. The Sino-Indian war was fought with no clear national aim by India. Although, after independence we followed the British system, there was no initiative for a well debated, well articulated and widely acceptable 'National Aim'. The so called formulation of a national aim remained the prerogative of selected few political leaders and there was no coordination between the

military and civilian establishments.¹⁰ A CDS could have achieved *Modus Vivendi* and a functional arrangement at the highest level whereby each stakeholder within the Services and outside it, could bring out the relevant aspects and a 'clear, unambiguous and achievable' national aim could be enunciated. The ill fated 'eviction' of Chinese 'intruders' from 'own territory' through the 'forward policy' which became the de-facto national strategy could thus have been avoided.

Ensure Operational Preparedness of Forces. *"An increase in the size or improving the equipment of the army costs not only money but also needs time"* - Statement by Mr Y B Chavan, Defence Minister of India regarding the NEFA inquiry in the Lok Sabha on 02 September 1963.¹¹ It is well known that IA was totally 'Unfit for War' in 1962. Systematical decay in matters related to military affairs and inordinate delays in modernisation through bureaucratic webs ensured that Indian armed forces remained totally ill prepared for a war. Without correctly assessing the threat or rather deliberately underplaying the threat from China, the highest decision making body in the country did not find it necessary to equip the armed forces with bare minimum resources required to defend the territorial integrity of the nation. Sudden political imperatives were allowed to spark off a war for which there was no preparation.¹² A CDS would have made the correct threat assessment sans any political compulsions. Based on that threat assessment, he would have ensured that the Armed Forces were adequately equipped, and more importantly trained for operations aligned towards that threat.

Facilitate Operational Art. The highest army leadership did not dictate the operational plans so as to decide on where and how the battles were to be fought. Lieutenant General Umrao Singh wanted to fight with his defensive line at Tawang and Lieutenant General Harbaksh Singh wanted to fight his defensive battle in Walong Sector at Hayuliang.¹³ There was no attempt made to display any operational art by the Corps Commander of IV Corps.

A CDS would have insisted that only a thorough bred professional was appointed as the Corps Commander to handle

critical operations and thereafter he was provided the necessary guidance so as to empower him to express his operational art for carrying out a successful defensive battle. It has been speculated by many that had Lieutenant General Harbaksh Singh or Lieutenant General Sam Manekshaw, two plain speaking veterans from WW II, been appointed as the Corps Commander, probably they would have given a display of their superior understanding of operational art and fought a well coordinated defensive battle at a ground of their own choosing.¹⁴

Offensive Use of Air Power. The non utilization of combat air power in 1962 remains one of India's biggest blunders of the war. The superior aerial reconnaissance and offensive air power assets could have been used to blunt the uncontested run of PLA in NEFA and Ladakh.¹⁵ Out of the many reasons attributable for not using air power, purely from the military perspective, the army's opposition, lack of Army/AF joint planning, Air Marshal Dewan's note and failure of the HDO stand out.¹⁶ In case there was a single point advisor to the government in the form of a CDS, the decision of using offensive air power would have been arrived at after thorough in-house discussions and deliberations. This forceful advice from the CDS would have probably overcome the inhibitions in the mind of Nehru due to his own perceptions of air power and also due to advice rendered to him against the use of air power by people like US Ambassador to India, Professor J K Galbraith. Air Marshal Bharat Kumar aptly puts it when he writes, *"The obvious question that arises is whether the 'correct' decision on the use of air power could have been taken. One opinion is that 'prejudiced' mind of the decision – makers could have been 'corrected' if there had been a proper higher defence organisation in operation at that time".*¹⁷

1965 Indo-Pak War

The 1965 Indo-Pak war in many ways has been classified as a 'stalemate' by many analysts. However, it can be best summarised as a war in which *'Pakistan lost face and India lost opportunities'*. Coming immediately after the debacle of 1962 Sino-Indian war, the Indian Armed Forces and political establishment had learnt their lessons. However, the presence of

a CDS would have played a critical role in the turn of events during and after the war.

Use of Air Power as a Tool of Deterrence.¹⁸ In the early summer of 1965, while Pakistani President, Ayub Khan decided to test India's willingness to go to war by sending in almost a division sized force into the Rann of Katch, India chose to ignore it as part of an overall strategy. A CDS in place could have advised the political leadership to use the IAF in offensive role and created havoc amongst the Pakistani land forces which were moving in an open terrain without any cover and without any air support. This kind of response would have definitely forced Pakistan to rethink before launching Operation Gibraltar and Operation Grand Slam.¹⁹

Facilitate Synergy Between Army and IAF. There were occasions during the course of the war when there was lack of synergy between the Army and the IAF. The IAF lacked situational awareness in the battle, which was not adequately provided by the Army. The Chief of Air Staff (CAS), Air Marshal Arjan Singh had indicated to the Defence Minister that when air attack is launched without adequate preparations, losses must be accepted and that pilots may make mistakes between friends and foes.²⁰ This was proved correct later when there were unfortunate incidents in which the IAF targeted own land forces. A CDS would have ensured that there was joint planning and execution both before and during the war.

Ensure an Operationally Fit Navy. During the course of the war, the Indian Navy (IN) was not equipped adequately. The IN was in neglect during the post 1962 years. The involvement of the IN can be best summarised by the fact that INS Vikrant was on 'routine' maintenance during the war. A CDS appointed well in advance would have ensured that not only the Navy's punch remained intact during the war but also it would have been employed strategically as part of manoeuvre warfare. The IN could have established a naval blockade of Karachi port or carried out a coordinated attack on it.²¹ This was not withstanding the fact that the political leadership did not want to escalate the conflict to the seas and had decided to limit the hostilities.²²

Advice Regarding Timing as well as Terms and Conditions for Ceasefire. The Indian political leadership agreed to a ceasefire with Pakistan when India was still capable of fighting and the enemy was showing signs of exhaustion. As part of this ceasefire, both sides agreed to withdraw from the territories they had captured. This meant that India had to return critical posts at Kargil, which overlooked the Srinagar-Leh highway and also the strategic Uri-Poonch Bulge with the critical Hajipir Pass.²³ The operational importance of territories captured across the Line of Control (LOC) could have been forcefully projected by a CDS and avoided much Indian bloodshed in future. Besides Jammu and Kashmir being integral part of India, parting with our territory gained, weakened our case as far as Jammu and Kashmir issue is concerned.

1971 Indo-Pak War

The Indo-Pak war of 1971 was fought with a decisive strategic and military victory for India which led to the liberation of Bangladesh. It was the first war in which all three Services played an equally important role in achieving the overall national aim. The government of the day knew its mind and had a clear political objective. General (later Field Marshal) Manekshaw was the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee and emerged as the virtual CDS and had full faith and support of the government.²⁴ During the war although there was no formal National Security Council (NSC), the civilian-military interface was adequate. However, there were instances during the course of the war, wherein the presence of CDS would have facilitated operations.

Joint Planning for Determining the Enemy Centre of Gravity (COG). During the planning stage of the war, a lot of deliberations were carried out for formulation of war plans and correct identification of the enemy COG. By end May 1971 itself, the Army HQ had asked HQ Eastern Command to prepare a draft plan for an offensive on East Pakistan.²⁵ In the beginning of August 1971, a conference was held at HQ Eastern Command Kolkata in which the Army Chief and Director of Military Operations(DMO), Major General KK Singh participated and discussed offensive plans in the East, code named Op Windfall.²⁶

The main point of difference emerged in identifying the enemy COG. The Army Chief and DMO proposed the key entry ports of Khulna and Chittagong as the COG. However, Major General (later Lieutenant General) JFR Jacob, the Chief of Staff of Eastern Command had proposed Dacca. In this entire deliberation, concrete views of the IAF and IN were not fully incorporated. This is not withstanding the fact the Air and Naval chiefs asserted themselves during the formulation of joint plans.²⁷ A CDS would have given a wider perspective incorporating views from all stakeholders before finalising critical aspect of the war.

Coordination During Attack on Karachi Harbour. The IN during the war, had carried out two attacks on Karachi harbour on the nights of 4/5 December and 8/9 December 1971. The IAF simultaneously attacked Karachi harbour on the night of 9/10 December 1971 in which fighter aircraft, Canberras under Wing Commander (later Air Commodore) KK Badhwar had carried out bombing of oil tankers in Karachi harbour.²⁸ However, the IN refutes this and categorically claimed that the oil tankers were bombed by its own missile boats on the night of 8/9 December.²⁹ It is quite clear that at the tactical level, both IAF and IN were not aware of each other's plans. This lack of joint planning and more importantly joint execution at the lowest level could have been disastrous. Also, oil as a strategic target was rightly identified by the IN and it was not so identified by the IAF.³⁰ It clearly brings out a lesson that had CDS been in place, firstly oil would have been identified as a strategic target as part of joint target list and secondly there would have been close coordination between IN and IAF during operations with significant strategic and military dividends.

Better Identification of Friend or Foe (IFF) Procedures. The IN had planned naval commando operations under the code name Operation Force Alfa. A special commando team was formed in conjunction with the Mukti Bahni and was launched in three merchant vessels to destroy ships in Mongla harbour. However, when the naval commandos reached Mongla harbour, they found that IAF had already destroyed it. Thereafter, the team moved to Khulna after duly informing HQ Eastern Command. However, due to lack of coordination, the IAF targeted these

vessels at Khulna mistaking them as Pakistani Navy. A joint planning architecture under the CDS would have ensured that such incidents were avoided and resulted in better IFF procedures.³¹

Coordination For Amphibious Landing at Cox Bazar. An amphibious landing operation off Cox Bazar was planned on 14/15 December to cut off possible escape routes of Pakistan personnel to Burma. The plan was to move a brigade size force through sea. The landing operation was confined to daylight hours only and at appropriate states of tide. Insufficient data on the landing sites and unexpected sea conditions rendered landing troops and handling boats extremely difficult and hazardous. As planning had been done off the map, actual survey of the beach was carried out only on arrival. However, when the troops landed in Cox Bazar, it was found that Mukti Bahni forces had already assumed control.³² This incident once again illustrated the importance of integrated training, planning and execution of complex operations under a joint command and control architecture.

Kargil War

The Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan is unique because it took place between two democratic nuclear weapon powers.³³ The Kargil episode was marked by surreptitious intrusion of regular Pakistani troops across the Line of Control (LOC), interspersed with Mujahedeen of Pakistani and foreign origin who succeeded in occupying and fortifying a large number of posts on Indian side of the LOC.³⁴ The Indian Armed Forces proved their mettle, albeit at a heavy price, that they could take on any Pakistani misadventure at their own place and time of choosing. Post Kargil a number of reviews and analysis were carried out on the reasons which led to the Kargil intrusions and also the war thereafter. The role of CDS clearly emerged prominently both before and during the war.

Modernisation of Armed Forces. Prior to the Kargil imbroglio there was a progressive decline in the defence budget ever since the process of economic liberalisation began in the early nineties.³⁵ The annual budgets from 1990-99 allocated the

lowest possible allocation to defence at 1.6 per cent in some years and generally 2.5 per cent in the remaining years.³⁶ This decline in focus on armed forces drastically affected its ability to modernise and to prepare for the type of war they were called upon to fight in Kargil.³⁷ Starting from basic infantry weapons, the Indian armed forces were short of sophisticated surveillance and Early Warning devices and precision strike munitions for artillery and the IAF. They were also deficient in attack helicopters such as Apache and Cobra, which were light and capable of operating in the rugged Himalayan terrain in air-to-ground strike role.³⁸ The disparity between India and Pakistani forces were stark in many cases. The Pakistani forces had night vision devices and the Indians did not. Similarly, Pakistan had the latest US radars for bringing accurate fire onto the Indian guns.³⁹ Almost 80 per cent of all the Indian casualties were due to Pakistani artillery which couldn't be suppressed as India lacked a Counter Battery or Weapon Locating Radar.⁴⁰ CDS could have highlighted the deficiencies to the political leadership and thereby created the requisite pressure on the government to modernise the Armed Forces.

Intelligence Architecture Revamp. In the wake of historic visit of PM Vajpayee to Lahore, many in the defence and foreign policy making bureaucracies assumed that relations with Pakistan were on the mend. As a consequence, the routine gathering of intelligence on Pakistan's force deployment, movements and likely actions slackened.⁴¹ No specific indicators of a likely major attack in the Kargil sector such as significant improvements in logistics and communication or a substantial force build up or forward deployment of forces were reported by any of the agencies.⁴² The lack of inter-organisational coordination added to the intelligence failure. The Research and Analysis Wing's (RAW) Aviation Research Centre had the requisite aircraft for surveillance of LOC. For reasons unknown, the IA failed to activate these assets.⁴³ A CDS as part of NSC would have received timely and well analysed intelligence from multiple sources and could have employed every available national asset to verify and corroborate the inputs.

Employment of IAF. Immediately on commencement of hostilities and seeing the enormity of the situation, the Army had

asked for close support missions by the IAF. The employment of air power was considered by IAF as a step that could lead to escalation of the conflict and for which they were not prepared. Therefore, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) could not clear the Army's request for air support till the concerned Air Commands had been alerted and the magnitude of the intrusion had been more or less assessed.⁴⁴ This delay created an avoidable bitterness between the two Services at the start of the war. Interestingly, there was also a difference of opinion between the Army and IAF in the way air power was to be used. The Army wanted to induct armed helicopters to take on the enemy, while the air force insisted on the use of fighter aircraft.⁴⁵ A CDS with perspectives from all three Services, accurate intelligence analysis and real time situational awareness from the battle front would have ensured seamless integration of all Services before approaching the CCS for a decision.

Advice Political Leadership on Operational Restrictions.

During the war, the Indian government had imposed restrictions on both land and air forces from crossing the LOC. There is no documented proof, references or statements from any Chiefs of Staff that the military leadership was consulted before imposing this constraint. In the normal course, dialogue with the military leadership is imperative so as to appraise the impact of constraints being contemplated by the government. The constraints should not make the national objectives unattainable by the Armed Forces.⁴⁶ A CDS as the single point military advisor would have offered sound military advice to the government on its decision not to cross the LOC despite the severe handicap of terrain and formidable positions occupied by the enemy. Even if the political leadership did not heed to advice of the CDS, a perception could have been created that the political leadership at the highest level has been apprised of the costs involved for not crossing the LOC and yet a decision has been taken in the supreme interests of the country.

Conclusion

In almost all the wars India has fought since independence, the vacuum in space for the *'highest- single point- military leadership-*

cum- advisor' has been highlighted often with disastrous consequences. Military history is not only a reflection of the exploits and sacrifices of its armed forces in protecting the nation's integrity, but it is also a grim remainder to the political and military leadership to learn from its mistakes. India's Goldwater-Nichol's moment has been long overdue. *The question is who will ride the tiger?*

Endnotes

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⁶ *Origin of the Joint Chiefs of Staff* in www.infoplease.com; accessed on 15 Jul 2018.

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