



Jawaharlal Nehru and the Chief of Defence Staff

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July 8, 2011

Summary

The appointment of the Naresh Chandra Committee is an opportunity for India's strategic community to engage in a long-overdue debate on our approach to national security. In this brief, the authors dwell on the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) controversy by discussing a little-known letter written by India's first Governor-General Mountbatten. In this letter, which is published along with this brief, Mountbatten claimed that Prime Minister Nehru was "no longer opposed to the idea of the CDS." After discussing the historical relevance of this letter the authors discuss the current debate on the issue. Among other recommendations they urge current stakeholders, mainly the three Service Chiefs, to clearly articulate their views on this issue. The authors further, argue that the Naresh Chandra Committee must also ascertain the views of major political parties on the issue of the CDS. Ultimately, this is an opportunity to usher in the next generation of defence reforms.

The recent decision to appoint a committee under Mr. Naresh Chandra to review defence reforms in India is a step in the right direction. While it will be premature to comment about the functioning of the committee, the announcement has been welcomed by almost the entire strategic community in India and has already triggered an intellectual and useful debate. Air Chief Marshal P.V. Naik's recent comments on the Chief of Defence Staff have also re-ignited the controversy. However, the debate so far has been so much along parochial lines that leading journalist Inder Malhotra has exasperatedly argued that either the CDS should be appointed or the post "should be firmly ruled out for ever with whatever consequences this would have."¹ While the continued silence of the other service chiefs might reflect their desire to avoid a media controversy, however, sooner rather than later, they will have to come up with a well-argued, considered view.

This then might be the best time to discuss a less-widely disseminated letter by Louis Mountbatten, independent India's first Governor-General.² The significance of the letter lies in Mountbatten's assertion that Nehru, in the years before the 1962 China war, "was no longer opposed to the idea of the CDS." This brief discusses different interpretations of this letter before suggesting issues that need to be debated by India's strategic community.

The letter in question written on September 27 1977 to Lt. Gen. M.L. Chibber, who was then Director Military Operations, mainly dealt with the subject of the CDS (the letter is reproduced in full at the end of this brief). There are two major themes that emerge from the letter. First, that the appointment of the CDS in the early years after independence was not feasible as the Air Force and the Navy had officers with relatively junior years in service. More importantly, while Prime Minister Nehru agreed to the principle of this post, he thought that it would be difficult to implement due to possible opposition from Indian politicians. Nehru argued that a CDS would perpetuate the tradition of the post of the British Commander-in-Chief, an idea disliked by generations of freedom fighters. It is not clear from the letter, however, whether Nehru was afraid that it might lead to praetorian tendencies within the military or even authoritarianism within the political class. While expressing his opposition, Nehru also agreed to reconsider this issue over time. The second theme that emerges is Mountbatten's recollection of Nehru's views just before the outbreak of the 1962 China war. According to Mountbatten, this time Nehru was "no longer opposed to the idea of the CDS." But he expressed his inability to appoint General Thimayya as the CDS, which was suggested by Mountbatten, due to opposition from then Defence Minister Krishna Menon. The mutual dislike between Thimayya and Krishna Menon was no secret.

¹ Inder Malhotra, "Inner Strength First," *Deccan Chronicle*, June 29, 2011.

² This letter was first published by *Indian Defence Review*, Vol. 16, Issue 2, April-June 2001, pp. 130-132.

But Nehru's apparent inability to overrule his Defence Minister comes as a surprise. Of course, another interpretation of this could be that Nehru was not really convinced about the CDS post and used Krishna Menon's alleged opposition as an excuse. The rest of the letter touches on familiar themes – Krishna Menon's contempt for "intelligent independent senior officers," and preference for political appointments, Nehru's apparent anathema towards war and unwillingness to accept that possibility.

Before accepting the contents of this letter as gospel, it is important to note that there might be an element of post-facto justification to it. In other words, Mountbatten may have deliberately or inadvertently played up his exchanges with Nehru and his own, almost prophetic role, in anticipating events. The only way we can know more about this period is if the government allows access to the complete Nehru papers and follows a more rational, and mature, declassification policy.

Be that as it may, this letter can and should inform the current debate about the need for a CDS position. Expressing his views, and according to him the views of the Indian Air Force on this matter, Air Chief Marshal Naik makes three points.³ First, that the Air Force is not opposed to the appointment of the CDS but "does not want a CDS in its present form." In that case, the Air Chief needs to clarify as to what form of a CDS does he visualise? It is not enough to oppose without offering an alternative. His second point was a somewhat rhetorical question: "what role model of CDS do we want?" Again, this is a question on which the Air Chief must take a first cut at answering. It is inconceivable that over the last 10 years the Indian Air Force has not studied, evaluated and ultimately thought of a model of the CDS that is acceptable to it. The final substantive point was his assertion that we "don't need a CDS for the next 5-10 years" without any clarity about this duration. In other words, what would have to change during this time that would warrant the appointment of a CDS? These observations are definitely not meant as a criticism of the Air Chief or the Indian Air Force, but it is important to engage in a substantive and rational debate on an issue of great importance. To his credit, in the seminar on national security reforms, the Air Chief had urged for more debate among the intelligentsia for the higher defence organisation that is now required in India. We should live up to his vision.

It is fairly well-known that the Indian Air Force has, like most other Air Forces, historically opposed the appointment of a CDS.⁴ Moreover, statements from some Army officers have

³ "Indian Air Force Undergoing Major Transformation: Air Chief to NDTV," *NDTV*, June 25, 2011, available at <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/indian-air-force-undergoing-major-transformation-air-chief-to-ndtv-114743?from=NDTV&cp>

⁴ Anit Mukherjee, "Failing to Deliver: Post Crises Defence Reforms in India, 1998-2010," *IDSA Occasional Paper*, March 2011, p.16 and p. 29.

done little to assuage their legitimate fears that appointing a CDS might lead to an Army-dominated arrangement. The Army, as the largest service, must go out of its way to deal with such insecurities. Hence, for instance, if some form of the CDS is implemented the first Chairman could be from any of the other two services. After two or three CDS have completed their tenure, another committee can re-examine the system to suggest whether it should be continued with and in which form. In fact, the process of defence reforms should be institutionalised by periodic and constant self-analysis. That is what professional organisations do. It is to be noted that some form of defence reforms and organisational study are currently on in the UK, France and Germany. We must study and learn from their experiences and debates.

Rarely, if ever, have efforts at integrating the three services in any country been uncontroversial, a fact that our political class must keep in mind. While consensus based change is the preferred approach in a democratic society, however in matters of organisational restructuring, there will be disagreements as service bureaucracies will fear and resist loss of turf and power. Their disagreements, however, should be examined strictly on rational and factual grounds and not on emotive or opinion based data. Ultimately, for the current attempt at defence reforms to succeed, the government has to overrule opposition from entrenched bureaucracies both civilian and military, which is inevitable, and implement in full the recommendations made by the committee.

In the months ahead, it should be the endeavour of all members of India's strategic community to rise to the debate and do so respectfully. Among the models that must be debated upon, is whether we need a CDS concept or a Joint Chiefs of Staff (or one can call it Permanent Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee) with integrated theatre commands. Most modern militaries have some form of theatre commands and India's current arrangement of geographically separated command locations has led to sub-optimal outcomes.⁵ Moreover, in the absence of a CDS, the functioning of the Integrated Defence Staff has been undermined, there are problems in inter-services prioritisation (strangely which is currently done by the Office of Defence Finance), defence planning and overall force structures and preparation for national security challenges.⁶ As India continues to face considerable internal and external security threats and challenges, continued inattention to this issue can result in a major disaster – one that we can ill afford.

⁵ The Indian armed forces have a total of 17 Commands, and with the exception of the joint Strategic Forces Command and the Andaman and Nicobar Command, none of the service commands are in the same location. See Admiral Arun Prakash, "Keynote Address," *Proceedings of USI Seminar on Higher Defence Organisation*, New Delhi: United Service Institution of India, 2007, p. 9.

⁶ See Sandeep Unnithan, "Synergy Stalled," *India Today*, June 13, 2011 and Anit Mukherjee, *Failing to Deliver*, pp. 33-40.

Problems in our current arrangement need to be dealt with at three separate levels. At the strategic level by re-engineering the Ministry of Defence, National Security Council and reviving the Defence Ministers Committee. At the functional level by re-examining the functioning of Service Headquarters and introducing either a CDS or a Joint Chiefs of Staff model. Finally, at the operational level by establishing task oriented theatre commands which must necessarily have the capability to adopt a holistic approach to national security problems. Hence, such theatre commands must have advisors from intelligence agencies, Home Ministry, state governments and the diplomatic corps. Only then will it be able to effectively function.

The Naresh Chandra committee must also ascertain the views, in writing, of major political parties on defence reforms in general and, more crucially, on creating the post of the CDS. This is especially pertinent as the official position of the Ministry of Defence on the reason for not appointing a CDS is that political parties have not been able to come up with a consensus on this matter.⁷ Incredibly such a consensus has not been built up over the last nine years. This begs a larger question – if absence of consensus among political parties is the reason for the non-appointment of the CDS then how can we ensure that this experience will not be repeated with the Naresh Chandra committee? Political parties are themselves at fault for neglecting such an important issue. The Congress party has ideologically been ambivalent on creating this post.⁸ However, if the contents of Mountbatten's letter are true, then it is a clear indication that towards the end of his life Nehru was coming around to appointing a CDS. The Congress party and other major political parties must now clearly state their position.

In one of his last in-depth interviews K. Subrahmanyam, the chairman of the Kargil Review Committee, made a devastating indictment of India's political class when he argued that they are "still not in a position to tackle the national security issues with the seriousness they deserve – a fact that has to be acknowledged with a lot of regret."⁹ Indian political leaders must rise to the occasion and prove him wrong. That, in turn, would also be a befitting tribute to Jawaharlal Nehru who, as a true intellectual, was known to change his mind when faced with a compelling counter-argument. In our dreams for a safe and prosperous future we must now make our arguments and counter-arguments.

⁷ See statement from MOD official in the Standing Committee on Defence, *Thirty Sixth Report: Status of Implementation of Unified Command for Armed Forces*, New Delhi: Lok Sabha, Secretariat, February 2009, p. 5

⁸ See Anit Mukherjee, *Failing to Deliver*, pp. 29-30.

⁹ "Report of the Kargil Review Committee: An Appraisal," *CLAWS Journal*, Summer 2009, p.19.

Further Readings:

- General V. P. Malik, "Complexities of National Security Decision Making Process," *CLAWS Journal*, Summer 2011.
- Arvind Gupta, "The Naresh Chandra Task Force on National Security: A Timely Step," *IDSA Comment*, June 25, 2011.
- Anit Mukherjee, "Failing to Deliver: Post Crises Defence Reforms in India, 1998-2010," *IDSA Occasional Paper*, March 2011.
- IDSA Event Report, *Defence Reforms, Civil-Military Relations and Military Effectiveness in India*, May 30, 2011.

(A shorter version of this Issue Brief was published in the Indian Express.)



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27th September 1977

Dear Chib,

Thank you so much for your letter of the 20th September which I have read with the greatest of interest.

It is nice to see a Subaltern from the days when you mounted guard at Viceroy's House now a Major General and Director of Military Operations. Many congratulations.

To answer your questions in your paragraph 6:-

(a) The main reason for not urging an immediate appointment of a CDS was precisely that it would be a number of years before a naval or air force officer would be senior enough to be considered for the appointment. The tragic death of the most senior air force officer, Air Marshal Mukerji, in Japan, put back the date at least a couple of years.

But there was also another reason and that was although Prime Minister Nehru agreed with me in principle he said it would be difficult at this moment to get through the appointment of a CDS as it would give to the Indian politicians the idea of perpetuating the idea of the great "Commander in Chief in India" of whom the last one, of course, was Field Marshal Auchinleck. He did, however, agree to reconsider later.

(b) Lord Ismay and I worked hand in hand on these proposals but I thought it would come better from him than from the Constitutional Governor General as I then had become. He also tried to negotiate a CDS but met with the same opposition from Nehru and for the same reasons.

(c) I have never had any doubt that the time would come when India should have a CDS. It is more important now than ever in my opinion as India is about the only major country that does not have a CDS or at least a Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff's ~~system~~ *Committee*.

I should perhaps add that the last time Nehru stayed with me here at Broadlands before the Chinese invasion on the North East Frontier, I urged him to appoint General Thimayya to be the CDS right away as I could see trouble brewing up. He liked Thimayya immensely and was no longer opposed to the idea of a CDS provided it could be got through the Minister of Defence, at that time our mutual friend, Krishna Menon. He said ~~if~~ Krishna was so bitterly opposed to Thimayya and, indeed, all the really intelligent independent senior officers such as Muchoo Chaudhuri, that he was sure he could never get Krishna to agree.

I told him that the real danger was that Krishna was appointing people like Thapar as CGS who was a good administrator but had no command experience and worse still, Kaul who appeared to be a political appointment, though he had been a personal friend.

I warned him that if war came the Indian Army would suffer a quick defeat. He said there was no question of there being a war as India wished to be at peace with everybody. To this I replied that it took two sides to decide whether there would be a war or not and if either China or Pakistan were to invade they would have a war on their hands.

He replied that he relied on his agreement with Chou en Lai and the Chinese would never invade. I questioned this and then I said "If you are so certain you are going to have no war, why don't you cut down your armed forces and save money?"

This, however, he was unwilling to do as Krishna was against it.

I then said "Well, when you do get involved in a war I will do everything I can to come to your help."

When the Chinese invaded the first thing I did was to send out Field Marshal Sir Richard Hull, then the CGS, in a Britannia ~~with~~ which I had loaded to the very brim with self-loading rifles, as I knew the Indian Army had no up-to-date small arms.

The next thing I did was to send out my two Intelligence officers who were extremely high-class and did co-ordination with other Intelligence Services, to try and re-organise the Military Intelligence branch which had faded right away under the influence of the remarkable Sikh whose name I forget, who ran the Government Intelligence Service.

I came out myself a bit later on and met the Defence Council and Senior Officers and if you can find the Minutes of that meeting I think you will find I urged once more that they should immediately appoint a Chief of the Defence Staff and suggested that it should be General Thimayya.

It is just possible I made this remark out of Committee because of the well-known opposition of Krishna Menon, but I certainly made the suggestion to Nehru and I am afraid it wasn't adopted, I think again through Krishna Menon's hostility.

You have correctly noted that I managed to get a very considerable degree of unification in command and administration in the British Services. In those days we had overseas commands and I appointed ~~many~~^{many} Supreme Commanders under the title of "Unified Commanders-in-Chief" for the near East, middle East and far East. All this went very well, particularly during the confrontation in Borneo with Soekino.

However, I have always made a great point of saying that we would not follow that ludicrous Canadian example whereby they put the Army, Navy and Air Force into green uniforms and gave them the same titles.

My elder daughter, Patricia, is Colonel-in-Chief of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and I have been three times with her when she visited her Regiment and each year I notice that they are returning more and more to their own mess dress, their own ranks and their own uniforms. I think they will soon return to having the prestige and esprit de corps of their own Service while still having the benefit of unification at the top.

Great care is needed to avoid destroying esprit de corps of any Service by putting them all into a green uniform!

- 4 -

Be careful how you use this letter as it is probably irregular for a former Viceroy-Governor-General to communicate direct with the Director of Military Operations.

For this reason I have marked the letter "Confidential".

You can show it to the CGS if you like on a strictly confidential basis for advice as to how to proceed if you want to follow up these ideas.

I wouldn't in the least mind writing to the new Prime Minister as Morarji Desai is an old friend and would probably take some note of what I wrote, but I don't want to intervene at this moment when he has so many other problems on his plate.

yours sincerely

Manmohan Singh