

# MANAGEMENT OF OUR DEFENCE: ROLE OF THE COSC

JASJIT SINGH

*The COSC (Chiefs of Staff Committee) has not been  
effective in fulfilling its mandate.*

—Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security, February 2001<sup>1</sup>

The above statement by the senior-most ministers of the largest democracy in the world, with a professional military establishment which has often been engaged in wars, must indeed be unique in history. But it clearly requires us to understand the role of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), particularly as it has evolved over time and see what changes might be needed. This assumes greater importance since at another point, the report makes it more explicit by stating, “The functioning of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) has, to date, revealed serious weaknesses in its ability to provide single-point military advice to the government, and resolve substantive inter-Service doctrinal, planning, policy and operational issues adequately. The institution needs to be appropriately revamped ....” The report of the Group of Ministers (GoM) is believed to have been approved by the Cabinet, chaired by the prime minister, a year and a half after the armed forces (when the same ministers and military chiefs were still holding their posts) won a unique victory in the summer of 1999, starting from a very adverse situation when Pakistan achieved a near-total strategic surprise with

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1. Report of the Group of Ministers, “Management of Defence” in *Reforming the National Security System: Recommendations of the Group of Ministers* (New Delhi: Government of India, February 2001), p.97, henceforth referred to as The Report.

the Pakistan Army holding strategically and tactically advantageous positions on the high mountains in the Kargil region after having surreptitiously intruded across the Line of Control and built up fortified positions at high ground.

The GoM's report and recommendations are based the report of the Task Force on Defence Management, headed by Shri Arun Singh, a former minister of state for defence. The Task Force was composed of senior serving and retired (3-star) officers of the three Services. To any objective reader, the first questions that occur are: What is the mandate of the Chiefs of Staff in India? And were they required by that mandate to provide "single-point military advice to the government?" The follow-on question would naturally be: should the higher defence management by the political leadership in a democracy (particularly a

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parliamentary democracy, which itself relies on collective responsibility) of complex, specialised military forces, be based on "single-point" advice (rather than collective advice) on military strategy and its direction and long-term investments for national defence?

The first question can be answered quickly and unambiguously, that the mandate of the COSC—either in its historical evolution over the past two centuries, or in the British system which governed India till India till 1947, nor our own system set up since then—has never laid down a mandate for the COSC to provide "single-point" military advice to the political executive authority. In fact, the very nomenclature and constitution of a "committee" implies a mandate to render collective-cum-individual professional military advice. (More of this later.)

The judgment of the political executive that the COSC has not been effective seems to be an extension of the prevailing confusion about the role that it has played. In any case, as far as the 1999 Kargil War (which triggered the Kargil Review Committee, and the Task Force on Defence Management in turn to the report of the GoM) is concerned, this mythology has been destroyed by the recent book of General

V.P. Malik, the then Chief of Army Staff and Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee who, writing with the insider's knowledge and in spite of an army-centred bias, has asserted that the COSC worked in great unison and there was complete synergy between it and the Cabinet Committee on Security.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to suggest that this was widely known or understood. In fact, there has been a widespread belief that, because the Chief of Air Staff, in response to the request of Army Headquarters (HQ) to employ Mi-35 attack helicopters, said that they could not be used at the heights of Kargil because of their design-performance limitations,<sup>3</sup> and believed that use of combat air power in our own territory against ambiguous targets (which may well include our own people) should be authorised at the level of the political executive, obviously in view of the enormous implications of such use, the Indian Air Force (IAF) was not willing to support the army.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the COSC did not function effectively! The unfortunate fallout has been that the uninformed criticism of the Chief of Air Staff rapidly expanded to unjustified condemnation of the IAF even by knowledgeable people, vitiating inter-Service relations and giving rise to strident demands for a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) as the "supremo" to provide single-point advice.

What is important is that there is no evidence that the IAF was unwilling to employ combat air power to support our land forces. This is what makes the then

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2. General V. P. Malik, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2006).

3. They had been acquired on the advice of the Indian Army for use against tanks and armoured forces.

4. One must note that use of combat air power within our own territory against suspected militants, who may well include our own people, innocent or misguided, would have enormous domestic political implications besides international politico-diplomatic ramifications. Hence, the decision rightfully must be taken by the political executive in keeping with the well-established fundamental principle of civilian political control and direction of military power of the nation.

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Chief of Army Staff's repeated assertions in his recent book that the IAF did a splendid job in supporting the army, both through interdiction and close air support, while ensuring skies safe from hostile air power so

important; and this resulted in the use of air power having a strategic effect on the outcome of the war. General Malik records that the use of combat air power in Kargil "altered the dynamics of the war" in our favour. This is indeed refreshing when seen in the context of former army commanders either ignoring the role of the IAF (as Lieutenant General Candeth did, in his book on the 1971 War) or outright condemning it (as Lieutenant General Harbakhsh did while recording evidence to the contrary in his own book regarding the 1965 War).<sup>5</sup>

#### HIGHER DEFENCE ORGANISATION AND ITS MANAGEMENT

It cannot be anyone's point that there have been/are no—or that there never will be—professional differences among professional heads (and at lower levels) of specialised Services. Some such differences are attributable to turf and ownership issues, while others may be due to personality problems. Such differences have been occurring even in the best organised and well-oiled systems in modern

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democracies like those in the UK, USA, France, etc. After all, we come across significant differences in diagnosis and treatment prescribed even among the best professional medical practitioners! This is why modern systems of higher direction and management of national defence rely so heavily on corporate planning and decision-making rather than on a hierarchical military command chain which otherwise is so crucial for fielded military forces. Even their commanders are expected to listen to the professional advice of their numerous commanders and specialist experts

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5. See Lt General K.P. Candeth, *Western Front: Indo-Pakistan War 1971* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1984), and Lt. General Harbakhsh Singh, *War Despatches* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991), and Lt. General Harbakhsh Singh, *In the Line of Duty: A Soldier Remembers* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 2000).

The problem in India has been that we do not have an historically imbued inherited institutional system of the type which has been in existence in Britain since the mid-17th century out of which has evolved its present system. Similarly, the German General Staff and the American systems have a long history of organisation, successes and failures, and reforms with changing times. The evolution of the higher defence system in each country took into account the nature of the political system in the country, its strategic aims and culture, military challenges and tasks, changes in technology, strategic environment, relative role of the different components of military power, etc. In India, the efforts to set up a modern system since 1947 on the basis of the historical experiences of others (since we lacked our own experience in modern times), remained deficient in structure as well in institutionalising what was set up in the beginning itself, and what was left was soon dissipated, leaving the key level of the Chiefs of Staff Committee hanging in a virtual vacuum.

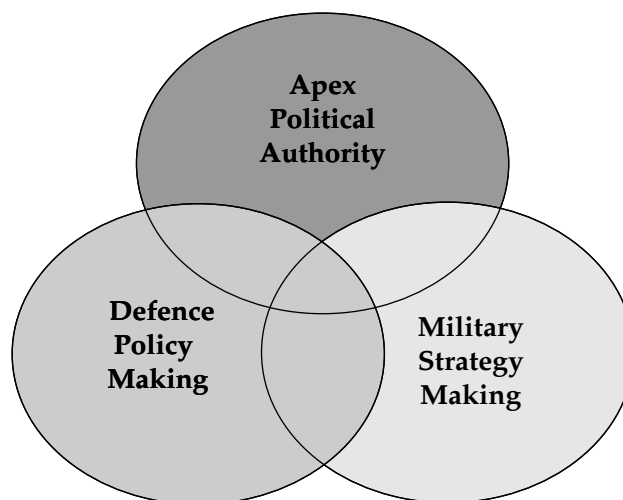
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In essence, there are three distinct authorities deeply enmeshed, vertically and horizontally, for planning and direction-making in modern defence and its effective management. These may be depicted in a notional diagram as at Fig 1 (where the COSC occupies the core space where all three overlap) which may be explained briefly as follows:

- **Apex Level Executive.** At the apex level, authority must rest with the political executive. In a democracy, it is constituted through democratic processes and could be based on a presidential form of government (as in

the United States) or a parliamentary form of government like in India (and the UK). In the UK and in India, this role was performed by the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) chaired by the prime minister.<sup>6</sup> Each country evolves the organisational structures and methods to effectively manage defence policy planning, allocation of resources, and military strategy.<sup>7</sup> This would require organisations that are intermeshed and have the authority and responsibility to undertake these tasks. In this context, two decision-making challenges stand out: that of investing resources in military capabilities; and second, the direction of military operations.

**Fig 1: Higher Defence Planning and Management**



Note: The Chiefs and the COSC lie in the area of overlap of the three segments.

6. In the UK, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet was first set up in 1895 and a large number of sub-committees serviced it. For some period after this, it functioned as the Committee for Imperial Defence, and then reverted to the original title and task. By 1938, the sub-committees were composed of as many as 900 persons, and 130 reports of experts from various departments and disciplines were constituted into a War Book. In India, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet was instituted immediately after Independence.
7. It is worth recalling that the supreme organ of the Maurya war machinery in India was the "War Council," chaired by the king, where all decisions of fundamental importance relating to war and peace were taken through a consultative process. By the time of the Imperial Guptas, the War Council had become a permanent institution.

- **Defence Policy Planning, Resource Allocation and Management.** Below the apex level, but drawing its authority from it, an organisational structure would be necessary to undertake the myriad complex challenges of defence policy planning and resource allocation to build and maintain the desired level and quality of military capability. By definition, this is a multi-disciplinary governmental task with requisite powers which would need to be supported by a joint military-civil staff, with specialised corporate groups taking a national approach. Unfortunately, this level has never received the attention that it deserved.
- **Military Strategy and Operations.** This level demands specialised experience and expertise and the constitutional authority over the armed forces which experience worldwide has shown, need to be specialised but coordinated in their functioning. Toward this end, the chiefs of each Service were constituted into a committee as the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Broadly speaking, the chiefs have a dual role to perform: that of being the commander of each Service, and, at the same time, the corporate collegiate advisory body to the political leadership, collectively as well as individually. The COSC was to be assisted by a number of sub-committees, the most crucial of them being the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) and the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). A clearer understanding of the role and history of these two is crucial to any discussion of the higher defence organisation and its management (especially the role of the COSC) in India.

#### **BRITISH HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE**

The British experience is the best template for our study of the three levels, both because we also adopted a parliamentary system of government like the UK, and because of the advantage accruing from the vast experience of the British system,

besides our own system having been set up on that pattern.<sup>8</sup> The system has remained under regular review and has been adjusted with changes in environment, technology and military tasks. Major reforms in recent decades took place in 1964 and then again in 1984. But the fundamental principles and broad structures and their functioning have remained consistent.

**In Britain, the defence policy planning, resource allocation and their management and direction have been handled by a system of Boards/Councils for the past three centuries.**

At the apex, of course, the authority of the King of England gradually gave way to the prime minister and his Cabinet, which is answerable to the people through the elected Parliament. A separate department of the navy, army and air force was set up in the government under the apex authority as each Service started to play a distinct and specialised role in national defence; headed by a political authority as a minister who

was not necessarily a member of the Defence Committee of the Cabinet, these were combined into an integrated Ministry of Defence in 1973. The USA still has political heads for each of the Services (and other specified functions) as Secretaries under the Secretary for Defence. But for the apex political executive to function effectively (and for the third segment of authority, that of military leadership, to provide professional advice and direct military operations), in not only fighting a war but also the peace-time preparation of military forces for a future war, it is the second segment that is most crucial and, hence, deserves some attention beyond the generalised approach.

In Britain, the defence policy planning, resource allocation and their management and direction have been handled by a system of Boards/Councils for the past three centuries. The British tradition goes back to the 17th century when a Board of Admiralty was set up in 1628 to exercise general control over naval affairs. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, no fewer than 13 civil

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8. If the history of the British, American and German higher defence organisations had been taught at our defence training establishments (rather than mere organisational charts with the briefest of notes), our overall defence planning and management system would have benefited immensely, especially in strengthening the system and the culture of jointness.



departments (including the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, Navy Board, Victualling Board, Treasurer of the Navy, etc.) were dealing with naval administration on a semi-independent basis. The First Lord of the Admiralty (not to be confused with the First Sea Lord, the military head) exercised full authority over the navy and was a member of the Cabinet (as the political head responsible to the Cabinet and the Parliament) and the various Sea Lords were made responsible to him, although they had to consult the First Sea Lord on all matters of importance. By the beginning of the 20th century, a great deal had been done to place the army and the navy on a sound organisational basis, with civilian control over the armed forces well established. The army commander-in-chief was replaced by the Chief of Staff in 1895 who, as a military professional advisor, was to advise the minister for war (defence in modern parlance) on all technical military problems, including operational plans, intelligence, appointments and promotions. This was followed up with the establishment of the Army Council in 1904. And an Air Board was established in 1919 as soon as Royal Air Force was established as an independent force, the third component of military power on the analogy of the Army Council and the Admiralty Board which had been functioning for a very long time.

Britain established a CDS in 1958 by merging the two posts of the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (set up in 1956) and the Chief of Staff (to the Cabinet) established since 1895. The functions and responsibilities of the CDS were laid down by the British government in the White Paper of 1958 as follows:<sup>9</sup>

The agreed collective advice of the Chiefs of Staff Committee will be rendered to the Minister of Defence by the Chief of Defence Staff. Where it is not possible for

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9. Cmd. 476.

him to tender agreed collective advice, he will report to the Minister the views of the other members of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and will be responsible, as the principal military adviser of the Minister, for rendering his own advice to the Minister in the light of those views.....

*The Chiefs of Staff are responsible through the Chief of Defence Staff to the Minister of Defence for the conduct of military operations. Operational orders hitherto issued jointly in the name of the Chiefs of Staff Committee will now be issued by the Chief of Defence Staff as the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. (Emphasis added.)*

The White Paper further emphasised the collective responsibility of the Chiefs of Staff, making them responsible for “professional advice on strategy and military operations and on the military implications of defence policy generally.”

The system of Boards/Councils has continued with some consistent features in all the changes over the centuries and the wars Britain fought, down to the current times. These have governmental authority and include political authority integral to them, besides the military chiefs as well as the civil bureaucrats and experts from various segments and departments of the government. The 1963 White Paper had laid down the composition of the Defence Council headed by the defence minister to exercise the powers of command and control previously exercised by the Board of Admiralty and the Army and Air Councils and also replaced the Defence Board set up in 1958. The Defence Council was to consist of:

- Secretary of State for Defence (Defence Minister).
- Ministers of State.
- Chief of Defence Staff.
- Chief of Naval Staff.
- Chief of General Staff.
- Chief of Air Staff.
- Chief Scientific Advisor (to Defence Minister).
- Permanent Under Secretary of State (Defence Secretary).

The Defence Council was to deal with major defence policy and

management of defence was to be delegated to Navy, Army, and Air Force Boards, each of which would be chaired by the defence minister. The composition of the Air Force Board (of the Defence Council) in 1963 was as follows (with the top three being political leaders, and the Council having the powers of a government department) and the composition of the other two Boards was to be similar:<sup>10</sup>

- Defence Minister, Chairman.
- Minister of State.
- Under Secretary of State.
- Chief of Air Staff.
- Vice Chief of Air Staff.
- Deputy Chief of Air Staff.
- Air Member for Personnel.
- Air Member for Supply and Organisation.
- Chief Scientist (Royal Air Force), etc.

It can be argued that the 1947 organisation had also created a Defence Minister's Committee to lay down defence policy and management strategy, including resource allocation, for joint issues, as well Defence Minister's Committees for each of the three Services to consider major policy issues affecting that particular Service. Can these be treated as the equivalents of the Boards in the British system? The composition and role were not the same as those in Britain; and they progressively either fell into disuse or lost their powers by being taken outside the governmental structures of the Cabinet Secretariat. These committees did not include the PSOs (principal staff officers) as members. And, hence, their staff was not part of even the Ministry of Defence. In due course, the disjunction between the Ministry of Defence and the military staff grouped into Service HQ under the PSOs kept growing as a consequence of the trend. It is worth noting that there are no "Service Headquarters" in the UK and the USA, unlike ours (which progressively

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10. Cmd 2097 of July 1963 as presented to the Parliament. The Hasletine reforms of 1984 made some changes essentially to adjust to the 1973 integration of the Ministry of Defence from the earlier four ministries.

became “attached offices” and the Services themselves *de-facto* “subordinate services” with little authority. But by any logic, these committees had the potential to grow into the role of Board/Council.

This also brings us to the organisation of the Defence Ministry in the UK which was to comprise:

- The Defence Staff, including the Naval, General, and Air Staffs, under the CDS and COSC.
- The Defence Scientific Staff under the Chief Scientific Advisor.
- The Defence Secretariat under the Permanent Under Secretary of State.
- The Staffs of the Principal Personnel Officers of the three Services.
- The Staffs of the Principal Administrative Officers of the three Services.
- The Staff of the Controller of the Navy.
- The Staff of the Master General of Ordnance.
- The Staffs of the Second Permanent Under Secretaries of State (three Services).

**In 1955, when the title of commander-in-chief was abolished in India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had stated in the Parliament that the government would be setting up Boards and Councils. This, however, was never implemented.**

The organisation has undergone further changes after the Hasletine reforms of 1984.

But the important point from our perspective is that the total staff currently found in our Service Headquarters would logically have been an integral part of our Ministry of Defence if the original system had progressed logically from what was set up in 1947.

Incidentally, in 1955, when the title of commander-in-chief was abolished in India, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had stated in the Parliament that the government would be setting up Boards and Councils. This, however, was never implemented. One of the major factors was the objections of the Chiefs of Army Staff who did not wish to have their PSOs sit as members of the Army Council as is the case in the UK.<sup>11</sup> Instead, what the army sought from the very beginning, since

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11. Maj. General D.K. Palit, *War in the High Himalayas* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991), p. 125.

Independence, was a “commander-in-chief” of the three Services, possibly with a Joint General Staff on the pattern of the German General Staff of the 19th century.<sup>12</sup> The CDS became a fall-back position over time after Lord Mountbatten wrote to Nehru in the late 1950s, asking him to appoint General Thimayya as CDS.<sup>13</sup>

### CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE

The British objective of setting up the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1923 based on Lord Salisbury Report was:

1. “To advise the Committee of Imperial Defence (later Defence Committee of the Cabinet) on all matters military,
2. “To obtain from the three Services a combined military opinion for political consideration.”

The Chiefs of Staff carried dual responsibility, firstly, as heads of their Service to their particular minister, and, secondly, as members of the Committee to the Cabinet. The Chiefs of Staff bore to the Cabinet the responsibility for the actual day-to-day conduct of the war and the direction of military operations, as well as for the expression of a joint opinion on all matters affecting those matters.

**The Chiefs of Staff would remain “responsible for preparing strategic appreciations and military plans and submitting the same to the Defence Committee of the Cabinet.”**

At the end of World War II, the position of the COSC was codified in the White Paper<sup>14</sup> which laid down that the Chiefs of Staff would remain “responsible for preparing strategic appreciations and military plans and submitting the same to the Defence Committee of the Cabinet.” The White Paper also laid down that: “On all technical questions of strategy and plans it is essential that the Cabinet and Defence Committee should be able to have presented them directly and personally, the advice of the Chiefs of Staff as the

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12. General J.N. Chaudhri, *Arms, Aims and Aspects* (Bombay: P.C. Manaktala & Sons, 1966) pp. 195-196. (This was originally published under a pseudonym in *The Statesman*, March 12, 1958).

13. C.B. Khanduri, *Thimayya: An Amazing Life* (New Delhi, Knowledge World, 2006).

14. Cmd. 6923.

professional advisers of the Government. Their advice to the Defence Committee or the Cabinet, will not, therefore, be presented only through the Minister of Defence. However, before any major strategic plan is submitted to the Defence Committee, he (the Minister) will usually discuss it with the Chiefs of Staff, though not with the view to acting as their mouthpiece in the Defence Committee."

Just around the time we were diffusing the higher defence organisation, the British government had moved further in the evolution of the higher defence organisation by creating the post of a Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee on January 1, 1956. The terms of that appointment were based on the principle long established that those advising the political leaders on military matters must also be responsible for executing the government's military policy. Hence, it was made amply clear that *the collective responsibility of the Chiefs of Staff was preserved and that the chairman and the other Chiefs of Staff were jointly the professional military advisors to the government*. If differences of opinion were to arise, as indeed they would, based on professional judgment of the specialised Services, the chairman was free to give his own personal advice. But he carried the obligation and responsibility to convey any opinion of his colleague(s) which was contrary to his own. Equally important, at any meeting of the political leaders including the Defence Committee of the Cabinet, any individual chief was free to give his own opinion. This, of course, was based on the long-established procedure that the Chiefs of Staff would be in attendance at all meetings of the Defence Committee.

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#### OUR HIGHER DEFENCE ORGANISATION

The higher defence organisation in India was formally established by a Cabinet resolution on September 25, 1947, just one month after Independence. The organisation, proposed by General Ismay, who had been the Chief of Staff to the British prime minister through World War II, formed the basis of the new system

and was similar to that in the UK at that time. Incidentally, the Ismay proposals were also the basis of the US system.

In the pre-1947 period, India was only a theatre of operations and its national defence management system was essentially constituted as a theatre command. The higher defence policies for management and execution emanated from London for which an Imperial Defence Committee and a system of Boards/Councils was set up at the crucial politico-military interface. The British system has been evolving in response to changes in the geopolitical environment, military tasks and objectives and needs of defence, both unilateral and as part of a larger grouping, earlier to meet imperial responsibilities and later those of politico-military alliances. In essence, it has been composed of three levels deeply integrated, vertically and horizontally:

- A committee at the political level, mostly as the Defence Committee of the Cabinet.
- A set of Boards/Councils constituting the governmental authority for planning and management of policy and resources for overall defence policy and separately for each Service.
- Collective military leadership at the level of the COSC with key sub-committees to assist them, essentially in joint planning and conduct of military operations.

An examination of our higher defence organisation over the past six decades clearly shows that only the first and third levels were established.<sup>15</sup> As regards the second level, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, when announcing the abolition of the title of “commander-in-chief” of the top military leaders also stated in the Parliament that Boards would be set up. But that never happened and this has left a critical gap in our higher defence management structure. Even the apex body has very often not functioned. In fact, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet had stopped functioning just about a decade after it was set up. But there is sufficient evidence to confirm that it operated extremely well according to its charter (along with the Chiefs of Staff

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15 . Jasjit Singh, “Management of Defence” in Jasjit Singh ed., *India's Defence Spending* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, Second Edition, 2001).

Committee) during the longest war India had to fight, the Kashmir War of 1947-48.<sup>16</sup>

The system established in 1947 and which managed and directed the build-up of India's defence capability during the first 15 years, including the conduct of the longest war that we have fought (the 1947-48 Kashmir War) consisted of 17 committees. All these committees, with the exception of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, were composed of civil as well military officers in view of the inextricable inter-relation between civil and military factors impinging on defence policy and management. But all these were committees of the government and not of subordinate services or departments. These are listed at Appendix A.

It may be seen that the structure established in India in 1947 was an elaborate system of corporate management of higher defence by a committee system. As noted earlier, a total of 17 interlocking committees of, and in, the central government, layered at different levels starting from the Defence Committee of the Cabinet at the top, were established, based on the corporate system and the principle of delegation, accountability and responsibility. All these were located in the Cabinet Secretariat which would naturally bestow on them the authority of governmental decision-making rather than that of a subordinate service. More important, it was argued that the Cabinet Secretariat should not only serve the Cabinet Committees but also the Defence Committee, the Chiefs of Staff Committee and all the subsidiary bodies. And for that purpose, a Military Wing of the Cabinet Secretariat was established (which later was moved out). In fact, it was visualised that all these committees should meet in the same building in which the Cabinet Secretariat was located and, thus, become the hub of the whole coordinating machinery. The charter of each committee was clearly set out.

### **COSC MANDATE**

The GoM, based on the report of the Task Force on the Management of Defence headed by Shri Arun Singh, came to the conclusion that "the COSC has not been effective in fulfilling its mandate."<sup>17</sup> This requires some examination. But the

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16. S.N. Prasad and Dharam Pal, *History of Operations in Jammu & Kashmir (1947-48)*, (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1987).

17. The Report, n.1, p.100.



central question which arises and no doubt which the Task Force would have addressed (although the GoM's report makes no mention of it), is the question we asked right at the beginning of this study: what is the current mandate of the COSC? This may well be classified although there is no real reason to do so. One of the most important elements of the defence forces is a clear understanding of the role and functioning of the highest military decision-making body like the COSC; hence, this should be accessible not only to all Servicemen, but also to civil service personnel (both in and outside the defence establishment). In fact, the mandate of the COSC should be a public document and placed on the floor of the Parliament.

The nearest understanding that we can get is from the mandate originally stipulated for the COSC. The Cabinet had approved the following mandate in 1947 and there is little information about whether this has been modified or revoked at any time since then:

"The Chiefs of Staff are the authority for advising the Defence Minister and normally through him the Defence Committee of the Cabinet on all military matters which require ministerial consideration."

But it would have been impossible for the COSC to fulfil its mandate over the decades due to the dissipation of the framework in which it was to function. The COSC also lost its intrinsic authority to deal with military matters after it stopped being situated in the original corporate governmental framework as a key committee of the higher defence organisation (which exists in all democracies) along with a number of sub-committees to provide support for defence planning and military strategy and its proper execution. General D.K. Palit, who was the Director of Military Operations for most of the 1959-62 period, wrote in 1971, "The decision-making system that was established during the years of India-China confrontation of 1959-62 was starkly ad hoc and designed primarily to suit the

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personality of the Prime Minister”<sup>18</sup> who no doubt was relying almost entirely on Krishna Menon in defence matters.

Defence policy-making and the functioning of the higher defence organisation had become ad hoc and the original charter, therefore, was no longer functional since the corporate defence decision-making was no longer functioning. There is ample evidence, for example, that the Chiefs of Staff Committee during 1959-61 had put up a number of appreciations of the situation, the options available and the steps needed to meet the rising military threat from China. But they remained unactioned and were not even discussed in the Defence Minister’s Committee or the Defence Committee of the Cabinet which had stopped meeting. Interestingly, for the meeting called on November 2, 1961, chaired by the prime minister, to discuss the major change in our defence policy and military posture with its taking over the defence of the Sino-Indian frontier, the Chief of Air Staff was not even invited nor his views sought, in spite of the fact that air maintenance would be critical due to the logistics deficiencies and absence of roads in the Himalayas; and possible use of combat air power had to be planned for the contingency if the Chinese became more aggressive. It is not clear whether the decision not to use combat air power during the Sino-Indian War in 1962 was taken in the DCC; for that matter, little is known in the public domain about how the COSC handled the war. Many more examples can be cited of the increasing marginalisation of the system as it was established and expected to grow, but did not.

The committees had started to dissolve by the end-1950s and the 1962 War dealt a death blow to most.<sup>19</sup> The Defence Committee of the Cabinet was replaced by an Emergency Committee of the Cabinet and not resurrected after the Emergency was over in 1967. In a parliamentary system, the role of the defence minister in defence planning and its management is extremely crucial. But the Krishna Menon days had virtually turned the (four) Defence Minister’s Committees into non-entities and decision-making was

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18. Maj. General D.K. Palit, *Hindustan Times*, April 11, 1971.

19. A serious study has yet to be undertaken regarding the functioning or otherwise of the higher defence management system in the period leading to the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and draw requisite lessons from it. Going by public reports, it appears that even the Henderson-Brook Report did not go into this aspect which *prima facie* was the single-most critical failure that led to the ignominious defeat. The GOM’s Report also indicates setting up of two joint/theatre commands. One only hopes that lessons if any of the *de-facto* theatre command with which Lt. General B.M. Kaul fought the 1962 War in the east would have been taken into account.

concentrated in the hands of the defence minister. From the point of view of this study, the sub-committees of the COSC which were crucial to their ability to fulfil their mandate in a professional manner were the (i) JPC; and (ii) JIC.

In Britain, a JPC was set up in 1927 in the office of the Committee of Imperial Defence as a sub-committee of the COSC. This committee *de-facto* provided a sort of General Staff for the three Services. The Joint Planning Staff of the JPC consisted of the three directors of plans of the three Services who divided their time between their own ministries and the Joint Planning Staff. The JPC was composed of three sections: the Strategic Planning Section (to keep the general military situation under review and recommend action to be taken), the Executive Planning Section (to examine the means by which the plans would be put into action), and the Future Operational Planning Section (to focus on future operations, however hypothetical), each of them manned by officers from the three Services.

In India, under the 1947 order creating it, the Joint Planning Committee, “to be in permanent session,” was to undertake joint military operational planning for the COSC with a permanent staff for the joint employment of the three Services. The committee was to be manned on a permanent basis with a joint staff. The joint military staff of the JPC was never established, and, hence, it could not set up a permanent structure; and the committee merely remained a committee of the three heads of the operational planning branches. It was only four decades later that a Defence Planning Staff of the COSC was set up in 1986. It did excellent work before falling into disuse, being unable to provide joint planning for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the failure to define its relationship with the segments of each Service which actually dealt with operational planning (that is, the Directorate General Military Operations in Army

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Headquarters, the Operational Planning Staff of Air Headquarters, and the Operations branch in Naval Headquarters). By that time, the Joint Intelligence Committee had been shifted from the COSC (in 1962) and the joint Defence Planning Staff was left to work on assessments of military value on agencies that had limited capabilities in this regard. Nor was the interface with Perspective Planning Directorates of the three Services formalised. Even if that had been done, the fact that all these organisational groups

functioned as part of the “attached offices” and did not carry the legitimacy of “governmental” authority and responsibility handicapped them as it did other institutions.

A JIC was established in 1938 in Britain as another sub-committee of the COSC. It came to be headed by an officer of the Foreign Office and was responsible for collecting all information about the enemy and preparing assessments of probable enemy action(s). Its staffing was on a similar pattern to that of the JPC. The two committees worked closely together and were summoned regularly to discuss and brief the Chiefs of Staff.

In our case, the JIC set up under the COSC in 1947, was taken out of it in 1962. But in the absence of the Joint Planning Staff of the COSC its capabilities were obviously limited till then, and it came to depend upon the Intelligence Bureau (IB) for all intelligence inputs and assessment. The end result was that the JIC, instead of being strengthened, was removed from the COSC to the Cabinet Secretariat where it continues to reside, with limited capabilities to undertake national assessments of intelligence, especially those of military related, militarily significant intelligence inputs.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence of the Kargil War and failure of intelligence assessment, a Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) was set up in 2001. It is too early

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20. By the time of the Kargil War, it had less than a dozen people on its staff to undertake assessments of national intelligence needs (ranging from nuclear to economic and internal security challenges), with three military officers with little or no intelligence analysis experience.

to judge its role and performance. But if we go by the report of the GoM which recommended its creation under the Chief of Integrated Staff, it is to “coordinate” the functioning of the Directorates of Intelligence of the three Services and the bulk of intelligence from technical sources is believed to be outside its purview and control. One wonders who would carry out intelligence assessments of military value for short and long-term defence and military planning? By placing the DIA under the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff, a bureaucratic barrier has been established, degrading the direct advice that the COSC should be receiving, while denying the system of the two crucial organisations — that of joint planning and joint intelligence staff—from working as equal partners where each should be dependent on the other for effective military advice to the COSC instead of the current linear system.

The casualty, naturally, has been the collective decision-making and military advice rendered by the Chiefs of Staff. In addition, it is not clear what the impact of the Government of India Rules of Business 1961 on the functioning of the COSC was? These placed the Service Headquarters as “attached offices,” implying thereby that the Services were in the nature of subordinate services and not part of the governmental machinery. This naturally undercut the authority of the chiefs to undertake the mandate. The result has been visible for decades. For example, the Chief of Air Staff had the authority to launch 1,000 aircraft at any one time. But till recently, he did not have the authority to permit an officer of the rank of wing commander to travel by government-owned civil airlines within Indian territory! Mere delegation of financial powers for revenue expenditure is unlikely to improve matters meaningfully.

It is quite clear that the COSC cannot truly fulfil its original mandate without the structures within which that mandate was to be carried out.<sup>21</sup> In fact, nothing

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21. At one stage, defence planning was to be carried out by a Committee for Defence Planning composed of key top civil bureaucrats without participation by the political leaders and/or military chiefs!

survives in practice of the original higher defence organisation which was similar to that in the UK, built on extensive experience. The erosion of the corporate system coincided with the appointment of Krishna Menon as the defence minister and the system never recovered from that experience. It is indeed ironic that there is an Accommodation Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) but no DCC which was to deal with all important questions relating to defence. Even the Military Wing of the Cabinet Secretariat which serviced these committees (including the DCC) was dissolved some years ago and the remnants shifted to the Ministry of Defence.

#### **THE KARGIL EXPERIENCE**

Within the existing handicaps and fundamental infirmities of the current system, the higher defence organisation has worked extremely well, thanks to the dedication of the military leadership at all levels. Doubts have been raised by the GoM regarding the effectiveness of the COSC, apparently based on the experience of the Kargil War. At least one of the Service chiefs was publicly arguing after Kargil War that “our existing Higher Defence Control Structure perpetuates single service thinking” and is “not conducive for the desired level of jointmanship and synergy in defence or operational planning.”<sup>22</sup> It appears that this comment was triggered by the unhappiness of Army HQ that the IAF did not provide attack helicopters when asked for in May 1999 when conflict in the Kargil sector had started. This view had led to enormous criticism of the air force and it was blamed for a lot of army casualties which could have been avoided. This also became the central argument before and by the Task Force on Defence Management which became the foundation of the recommendations of the GoM in February 2001 and their approval by the Cabinet. Fortunately, General V.P. Malik, the then Chief of Army Staff has provided us in his recent book with significant authoritative details of what actually happened.<sup>23</sup>

General Malik devotes a whole chapter (titled “Fog of War”) candidly stating that we were completely surprised by Pakistan which had launched its army

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22. Then Chief of Army Staff and Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee, General V.P. Malik, *Indian Express*, September 16, 2000.

23. Malik, n.2.

across the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) across a frontage of 160 km with depths up to 8-10 km. It is clear that the situation kept evolving during the three weeks of May 1999 during which the assessment was that intrusions had been achieved by militants. In early May, the DGMO (Director General Military Operations) Army HQ, visiting the area found everything normal (except for the usual firing across the Line of Control. It was only by May 12 that the infiltration of 100-150 militants emerged; and this increased to 250-300 by May 15. The previous day, the defence minister, in the presence of the army commander, Northern Command, and the corps commander publicly stated that the infiltration (by militants) would be vacated in the next 48 hours. On May 17, the Indian Army leadership asked for the IAF's help to use Mi-35 attack helicopters and Mi-17 armed helicopters. The IAF informed them that the Mi-35 cannot operate at these altitudes (at 11,000-18,000 ft) and the use of armed helicopters would require political approval since there was every chance that this could escalate matters.

On May 18, the Chief of Air Staff repeated his professional advice at the COSC meeting and later in the day, the matter was considered by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). The CCS turned down the proposal of the Army HQ and did not authorise the use of combat air power (extensive employment of the IAF non-combat air power for airlift, etc. was going on from the very beginning). Interestingly, the corps commander publicly stated the following day that the infiltration was a "local situation which would be dealt with locally." Malik records that Shri Jaswant Singh, the external affairs minister and a former army officer, opposed the use of combat air power and says that this was possibly due to the Track-2 efforts going on with Shri R.K. Mishra as the high-level emissary from the Indian government in Islamabad.

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The situation kept unfolding and a war was in progress regardless of what terminologies were used. On May 21, an IAF Canberra on a reconnaissance

mission in the area on our side was hit by a surface-to-air missile and managed to fly back on one engine. The COSC, at its meeting on May 23, assessed the situation to be sufficiently grave to call for a larger, more robust response and the Chief of Air Staff agreed to employment of combat air power subject, of course, to political approval. The CCS, after being briefed, approved the use of combat air power on May 25, but without crossing the Line of Control and the IAF

went into full action by the next morning. According to General Malik, there was total synergy within the Chiefs of Staff Committee and between it and the Cabinet Committee on Security throughout the planning and conduct of the Kargil War.<sup>24</sup>

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### **SOME CONCLUSIONS**

So what conclusions and lessons emerge with respect to the role and functioning of the COSC in relation to our higher defence management? Briefly:

- The military power of a state is meant to serve its political interests and objectives; and, hence, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (as the highest professional body providing military advice to the political leadership and execution of military operations in accordance with political direction) is situated in, and is expected to perform under, the principle of civil supremacy and control of the military. This assumes even greater salience in a parliamentary system like ours (and that in the UK). For the Chiefs of Staff Committee to function effectively and jointly with regard to defence policy planning and allocation of resources, they, along with civil bureaucrats and other experts (like scientists), need to be situated in corporate bodies like Boards/Councils within the governmental framework, exercising governmental power and authority.
- Collective responsibility of the COSC based on individual and collective professional judgment is built into the system as it evolved over four

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24. Malik, *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.



centuries. This becomes particularly important since the leadership of one Service cannot be fully conversant with the capabilities, limitations and the implications of employment of another Service, because of their increasing complexities and specialisation, both technologically and operationally. And, hence, the need for corporate-collegiate advice and decision-making in higher defence management.

- The chiefs also carry the constitutional responsibility of exercising their authority as commanders of their own Service (in spite of their title of “commander-in-chief” having been abolished in 1955) in accordance with the broad policy direction by the political leadership.
- There have undoubtedly been occasions when the role of the COSC can be considered to have been below the optimum in the past.<sup>25</sup> These, unfortunately, have never been examined in any meaningful objective way and this has given rise to a great deal of mythology about the problem and the solution. As regards the mandate of the COSC in India, it was clearly laid down soon after Independence, similar to that in the UK. An objective study reveals that infirmities in their ability to fulfil that mandate were more due to the structures of the higher defence organisation and management (within which the COSC was to function) and either dissipated or/and stopped being

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25. Many instances can be cited. For example, the Chief of Army Staff ordered the preparation of plans for military action in Goa in mid-1961, but instructed that the naval and air force chiefs were not to be informed (See then Director Military Operations, Army HQ, Maj General Palit, n.11, pp. 118-121); and nor was the Chief of Air Staff called in to the PM's India-China border conference on November 2, 1961 “despite the fact that air logistics was the cardinal factor in all Ladakh operations.” (Ibid., p. 122).

used in accordance with the original charter. The Ministry of Defence, expressing the government's position, even defined the role of the COSC simply as a forum for discussions among the chiefs!<sup>26</sup>

- The inherent weakness is not in the COSC, but the higher defence organisation which has dissipated over the decades without any appropriate system having been set up in lieu. The result has been that leave alone moving toward establishing Boards/Councils, as committed by the prime minister in the Parliament in 1955, there is no apparatus in the Defence Ministry which is supposed to take policy decisions regarding defence strategy, force structure, defence posture, etc. Under the circumstances, it is debatable what purpose the institution of a CDS would serve without establishing the joint apparatus with the requisite authority.
- The army leadership, very often in the past, has not given due importance to the professional judgment and advice of the IAF leadership, frequently leaving it out of its operational plans. What has been worse is that the IAF has been accused again and again, without justification, of failing to meet the needs of the Indian Army and this has strengthened demands for the institution of a CDS and ownership of helicopters and fixed wing aircraft. It is possible to argue that we need to establish a CDS system, but we must do it for the right reasons and not the ones based on negativism that have been normally put forward. For example, General Malik repeatedly endorses that the COSC and its daily meetings with the CCS led to a "very integrated approach" to "war management" during the Kargil War.<sup>27</sup>

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26. The Annual Report 2001-02, Ministry of Defence, Government of India stated, "The Chiefs of Staff Committee is a forum in which the Service Chiefs discuss matters having a bearing on the activities of the Services and advise the ministry."

27. Malik, n.2, p.133.

## HIGHER DEFENCE ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

(AS ESTABLISHED IN SEPTEMBER 1947)

### *Committees Headed by Political Leaders*

- (i) **Defence Committee of the Cabinet** to deal on behalf of the Cabinet with all important questions relating to defence, both short term as well as long term. The commanders-in-chief of the three independent Services (the title of Chiefs of Staff was a subsidiary one) and the defence secretary were to be in attendance.
- (ii) **Defence Minister's Committee** which would give decisions on all important matters which jointly concern any two or all three Services but which do not require to be referred to the Defence Committee of the Cabinet.
- (iii) Three committees designated as **Defence Minister's (Army/Navy/Air Force) Committees** to consider major policy issues affecting that particular service.

### *Committees Directly Under the Defence Minister*

- (iv) **Chiefs of Staff Committee** originally set up to service the Defence Committee of the Cabinet, later modified to be the primary military authority to advise the defence minister and normally through him, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet.

### *Committees Directly Reporting to the Defence Minister's Committee*

- (v) **Principal Personnel Officers' Committee** reporting directly to the Defence Minister's Committee on matters dealing with Service terms and conditions, discipline, recruiting, etc.
- (vi) **Principal Supply Officers' Committee** to advise the Defence Minister's Committee on inter-Service matters of policy regarding logistics.

- (vii) **Medical Services Committee** to advise the Defence Minister's Committee directly on matters of medical policy.
- (viii) **Defence Science Advisory Committee** to consider technical and scientific aspects of Service requirements, including close contact with research and development, production and basic science research.
- (ix) **New Weapons and New Equipment Production and Supply Committee** to coordinate the Services' requirements for production and supply of new weapons, munitions and equipment.

*Committees Reporting to the COSC*

- (x) **Joint Planning Committee** to undertake planning for the COSC for the joint employment of the three Services.
- (xi) **Joint Intelligence Committee** headed by a foreign service officer to provide the COSC and Joint Planning Committee with all information relating to the situation, inside as well as outside India, needed to enable them to discharge their functions.
- (xii) **Joint Administrative Planning Committee** to prepare joint administrative plans to supplement the operational plans for future operations.
- (xiii) **Service Communication Board** to advise the COSC on signals and communications matters.
- (xiv) **Joint Training Committee** to consider new techniques of inter-Service support and cooperation, including modifications to tactical doctrine, employment of, and training in, equipment common to two or more Services.

One more committee titled **Defence Coordination Committee** in the Ministry of Defence was set up soon after. Interestingly, except for the fact that the political leader in the form of the defence minister was to be the ultimate decision-making authority for all matters below those required to be taken by the Cabinet (and he too was to function with a series of committees), there appears to have been little place for individual "single-point" decision-making or as an advisor; and all decisions were corporate decisions since the system was constructed on the principle of corporate management by committees.