

THE INTEGRATED DEFENCE STAFF
MUST BE EFFECTIVELY UTILIZED
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The three services appear to be moving in different directions, ignoring the one binding factor, which should have been exploited to the hilt, the HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS). Though without the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), this body remains toothless, yet if utilized imaginatively under the guidance of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), it could become a tool for effectively handling common issues which concern the three services.

Services conducting studies on their own on for improvement to their specific cadre may be hampered unless other services are on board. The army chief has ordered a cadre review of the army, post a gap of thirty- five years. The aim is to consider options for reducing its internal ranks for two major reasons. The first is to reduce the gap between the army and the civil services and the second is to ensure that those who miss promotional avenues ultimately retire at a much more senior rank, thus enhancing levels of satisfaction.

It has clearly missed the fact that while independent services can conduct their own cadre review, the ultimate decision would need to approval of the others. While promotions within services is an internal matter and concern the vacancies and strength of their own cadres, they cannot reduce ranks and offset the inter-service rank protocol. Even if accepted by the government, it would cause embarrassments in joint service establishments. Hence, ideally it should have been, akin to the pay commission, a common study involving all the services.

Post the army accepting the AV Singh committee recommendations in Dec 2004, it was forced down on the other services by the then government, despite their objections. For the army this occurred because of lessons learned during the Kargil conflict, which required to be implemented to enhance operational effectiveness. The other services were not similarly impacted. This may not be the case now, as the study is aimed at improving service conditions for other than operational reasons. Hence, if for some reason, one of the other services rejects it or raises queries, then it may end up as an exercise in futility.

If a cadre review is proposed to be realistic and pushed through the government for approval, then it would need to involve all three and be realistic in meeting the aspirations of the officer cadre of the armed forces, not the army alone. With joint backing, it may become difficult for the government to reject. The same logic may not hold good for JCOs and other ranks of the three services as their terms and conditions for enrolment and service vary.

It must therefore be a task for the HQ IDS to be the lead agency, seeking inputs from all three services, evolving a common consensus and pushing forth a common rank structure for the three services as also a common retirement rank. This would ensure that rank protocol between the three services is maintained. Processing independent reviews would provide the government with excuses for rejections.

A similar approach is essential for handling the grant of Non-Functional Upgradation (NFU). It may be released soon, either through the courts or by the government. However, service conditions being at variance with the civil, it would need to be modified for implementation by the armed forces. Here again the services cannot operate in independent silos while evaluating its allocation but would need to have a common policy. The lead agency in this case again must be the HQ IDS.

The government on its part appears to be keen to ensure the three pillars of the military operate in independent silo's and dissension remains within them. It therefore seeks to adopt measures, including allocation of modernization funds to enhance the divide. Till recently, the Defence Secretary functioned as a de-facto CDS, as he resolved inter-service differences mainly concerning allocation of budget. The creation of the Defence Planning Committee under the National Security Advisor (NSA), makes him the de-facto CDS. To ensure he has complete control, HQ IDS has become the secretariat of the committee.

Without involving the IDS, the army cadre review would remain only on paper, unlikely to be accepted as the government would desire a similar exercise from the other services. NFU, even if granted would need to be implemented on a common platform across the armed forces, failing which it would come under criticism and lead to another collection of legal battles which would hamper its effective implementation.

The three service chiefs therefore need to work in closer coordination, especially on issues which impact all and effectively employ HQ IDS for

evolving a common solution. Ignoring it and working independently is the easiest way of ensuring that the government rejects an independent service's proposals, despite the army being the dominant service in the case of its cadre review.

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