



# ISSUE BRIEF

No. 77

May 2016

## US Military Reforms: Is the Secretary of Defence on the Right Lines?



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### Introduction

Ashton Carter, the US Secretary of Defence, speaking at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) on April 06, 2016, announced<sup>1</sup> that he has ordered the Department of Defence (DOD) to carry out a comprehensive department-wide review of various organisational issues covering the Office of the Secretary of Defence (OSD), the Joint Staff (JS), the Combatant Commanders (CCDRs), and the military departments. He went on to add that some of the changes would be effected within weeks under the existing authority while those requiring legislation will be worked out in conjunction with the House and Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) for implementation. The announcement came as the SASC was preparing to produce its own version of the Goldwater-Nichols reform as part of the 2017 National Defence Authorisation Act.

Senator John McCain, Chairman SASC, has held a series of hearings with security experts to identify shortcomings in the existing military and its higher defence management set-up, and

### Key Points

1. There is an imperative need to bring the JCS within the ambit of the military's operational chain of command.
2. Being part of the chain of command will enable the body to take an objective, broad spectrum view of the operations at hand in different theatres across the globe besides providing them the necessary authority and flexibility to act decisively to influence a battle.
3. The responsibilities of the DOD and the JCS should be delineated based on the areas of practical experience and expertise of these entities. Duplication of efforts tends to bloat the size of these offices.
4. CJCS and Service Chiefs should be involved in strategy development and operational planning. The aim is to evolve a broad-based decision-making process and to benefit from the experience of senior military commanders.
5. Downgrading the military ranks of CCDRs is a retrograde move which will adversely affect the ability of these commanders to decisively influence regional issues in countries across the world.
6. There is a need to go into the acquisition processes in a comprehensive way before making changes. It may be worthwhile creating a sleek independent procurement body to evolve a cost-effective, speedy and appropriate procurement procedures.

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## US Military Reforms ...

to suggest reforms. The present military structure is based on the 30-year-old Goldwater-Nichols Act 1986. Since then, a plethora of weaknesses and shortcomings have cropped up in the structural set-up, affecting the efficient functioning of the US military. The 1986 Act defines the roles and responsibilities of the Secretary of Defence, the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), the Service Secretaries and Service Chiefs as well as the Unified Commands of the DOD around the globe.

Many of those called to testify before McCain were also summoned to the Pentagon to meet with Secretary of Defence Ash Carter in what appears to be part of the Pentagon's effort to counter McCain's suggestions with its own version of military reforms, suggesting civil-Pentagon divergences over the issue.

### The Present Set-Up

In the US Army, the Service Chiefs as well as the CJCS do not have any command authority over combatant forces and are not part of the operational chain of command. The CJCS is the principle military adviser to the President, National Security Council, Homeland Security Council and Secretary of Defence. The military advice rendered by him is not absolute and is contestable. Any member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) who disagrees with the advice rendered by the Chairman has the option to submit his views to him which the Chairman is bound by law to present to the concerned along with his own views. It is significant to note that the CJCS has two bosses – the President as well as the Secretary of Defence, violating the principle of objectivity, a principle based on which he has been kept out of the operational chain of command.

The US has nine Combatant Commands (CCMDs) of which six carry regional responsibilities and three functional obligations, namely Special Operations, Strategic Forces and Transportation. The operational chain of command runs from the President through

the Secretary of Defence directly to the Combatant Commanders (CCDRs) of the CCMDs. Each CCMD is led by a four-star General or Admiral. Incidentally, over a period of time, it has been observed that the National Security Council (NSC) has been interacting with the CCDRs on issues relating to operational and contingency planning without going through the OSD. This is not a healthy trend.

### Chain of Command and its Implications: The Crux Issue

The present chain of command enables the US President and Secretary of Defence to receive ground inputs directly from the CCDRs, half of which may not reach the CJCS or the Service Chiefs, being out of the chain of command. Deprived of any first-hand knowledge or inputs pertaining to the operations in hand at the theatre of operations, what practical or 'objective military advice' can the CJCS render to the Secretary of Defence, as sought by him or to the President? Under such circumstances, the CJCS will either be providing his intellectual opinion, making assumptions, or merely passing on whatever inputs which he has received from the CCMD as his own. Is that what the US wants from its CJCS? In a number of situations, the inputs of the CJCS may be wide off the mark from the ground realities and contrary to the perception of the CCMD and his subordinate officers operating and facing the situations on the ground. The question is: could the CJCS advise the President sitting in Washington with no one reporting to him or when he himself is not connected to the ground situation? What the reformers need to understand is that the entire issue is about the need for efficient systems which can exploit the capabilities of the armed forces to deliver their best. It is definitely not related to the authority and powers that one section or the other within the system wields or some perceived notions of loss of civilian control over the military.

Today the Office of the Secretary of Defence (OSD) and the Joint Staff have bloated much beyond the

need, essentially because each one of them has started treading in the other's paths. For example, the OSD has taken on strategy development and operational planning in addition to the Joint Staff while the Joint Staff is involved in budgeting, acquisitions and such non-military issues. The question is: how competent is the DOD in matters relating to military strategy development and operational planning when compared to the CJCS and his staff? Is it in the country's interest to accept second grade operational plans prepared by non-professionals whose fall-out may directly affect the lives of soldiers? Is there a need for two different agencies to do the same job or is it that the President of the USA is not confident of the abilities of his senior military commanders? The military, on the other hand, has no expertise or competencies in areas such as budgeting, price negotiations or formulating contracts and agreements in acquisitions. The correct approach, therefore, would be to allow the experts to handle issues relating to their domain.

### **Delineation of Responsibilities**

What then is the way to delineate the areas of responsibilities of these two entities? The OSD, based on the National Security Strategy, should lay down the National Defence Strategy to enable the Services to enunciate their respective strategies such as the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force strategies. These strategies could be presented and discussed at the level of the President, with representatives from the State Department and members of the Senate Armed Services Committee being present.

Based on the Defence Strategy issued by the DOD, shaping military doctrines, adjusting force structures to meet the needs of the doctrines evolved, issuing training directives to include joint training aspects, laying down skill sets and competencies expected of the Services in the context of joint war-fighting, the requirements of weapon systems and platforms and their qualitative requirements, force structures to be staged at various theatres, intelligence inputs

needed to enable broad operational planning, logistic and communication needs, etc. will have to be left to the JCS (including the Chief of the Cyber Command when formed. The Chief of the Strategic Command will not be included), headed by the CJCS. The final decision and veto power will rest with the CJCS. This process would enable collective decision-making besides benefiting from the professional knowledge and experience of these senior officers. Training Directives for the Services will be issued by respective Service Chiefs based on the Joint Training Directive.

As for tasking the military for operations, it would be the sole prerogative of the DOD to issue the necessary operational directives specifying the political aim, the objectives to be achieved, the end outcome envisioned at the end of military operations and other non-military actions that are contemplated to achieve the larger aim, etc. incorporating inputs from the State Department, intelligence agencies and other establishments within the administration. The terms of references such as the timeframe, restrictions pertaining to areas and weapon platforms that are not to be used or employed, etc. will also have to be specified. It will then be the responsibility of the JCS to develop operational strategies and work out broad operational plans.

The CCMDs will be solely responsible for joint training and detailed operational planning, and their execution.

This arrangement, besides benefiting from the experience and military knowledge of military commanders at various levels, will ensure broad-based military decision-making and balanced distribution of responsibilities. It will involve the CJCS and the Service Chiefs in strategy development and operational planning which, at present, is not the case. The system will assist the President in receiving well weighed up professional advice besides helping to overcome criticism that the decision-making has been

over-centralised at the White House. The system enables joint planning and execution of military operations at both the macro and execution levels. The training of the respective Services based on the requirements of military doctrines evolved by a joint body rests with the respective Services. Joint training has been left to the CCDR which will enable him to train his command to meet his operational obligations, besides giving him a clear sense of the capabilities of his force in battle. This process will obligate the CCDR to take ownership of training his command.

### **Dealing with Multiple Threats Across the Globe in Overlapping Time Frames**

Ash Carter has very rightly emphasised the need for “synchronising resources globally for daily operations around the world” so as to “enhance flexibility” and accordingly, the need to “be in a position to move forces rapidly across the seams between combatant commands”. He has also underlined the necessity for visualising and factoring in “overlapping contingencies” in operational plans. This precisely is one of the reasons why the CJCS needs to be in the chain of command. Being part of the chain of command provides the CJCS the opportunity to comprehend the larger operational picture across the globe and provides him the authority to effect strategically important changes which will enable the military to operate in a “seamless way” and provide the much needed flexibility in the conduct of military operations. Once part of the chain of command, acting on situations spelt out by Ash Carter automatically become part of his job. It renders him accountable for his advice and actions.

Military operations and situations are dynamic. Consequently, any advice rendered or decisions taken will have to be related to the prevailing military environment and the way the operational situation is expected to develop, and not based on stagnant, imagined or fixed contexts. This requires

the adviser and the decision-makers to be a part of the system which in this case is the chain of command, and not remain onlookers or observers. The “objectivity as the principal military advisor” argument put forward to keep the CJCS out of the chain of command, therefore, lacks logic.

The outcomes of military operations depend on the ability of a commander to influence a situation. It is here that there is a need for ‘objectivity’ which can be better provided by the CJCS having an overview of the ongoing operations as well as the situation elsewhere rather than the CCDR who is involved in the ongoing battle in his theatre of operations. Such intervention is possible only if the CJCS is part of the chain of command which gives him the authority to move forces and act appropriately. This, of course, will have to be done in consultation with the CCDR. In this context, commanders will have to differentiate between reacting to situations and influencing the battle as otherwise, the CJCS will end up fighting the CCDR’s battle.

### **Downgrading Ranks of Appointments Held by Four Star Generals**

This effectively implies that the CCDRs commanding CCMDs will be downgraded from a four to a three-star status. Ash Carter has made known that the “DOD will look to simplify and improve command and control where the number of four-star positions has made headquarters either top-heavy or less efficient than they could be”. The first question that crosses a military mind is: how could downgradation of an appointment in terms of military rank, improve command and control? Will this, in any way, enhance the operational efficiency and capability of the US military? Does it imply that in the past, military ranks for appointments have been dished out without any thought?

As at present, CCDRs have responsibilities and interact with leaders in over 200 countries

across the world as a part of their job. Carter perhaps has not seen through the status that higher ranks provide to a military commander, especially in the case of CCDRs dealing with militaries, political leaders and bureaucracies across the globe and their significance and necessity in handling regional issues while operating overseas.

Viewed objectively, this move is nothing but an effort to downgrade the military vis-a-vis the civilian counterparts and is definitely not in the US' interest, with its global reach.

### Acquisitions

Carter has talked of reforms in acquisitions and about involving the Service Chiefs more in acquisitions, decision-making and accountability. This is a bureaucratic quick-fix solution to a non-military problem over which the military has least competence. This issue requires greater thought and analysis. The undisputable aims while evolving systems for acquisitions are cost-effectiveness, technological life, compatibility with equipment in service, robustness, easy maintenance, speed and transparency in procurement and minimum essential procurement documentation compatible with fair play and transparency. These issues cannot be addressed by involving the Service Chiefs. On the contrary, it may be good idea to create an independent military procurement organisation with minimal permanent staff (civilian), with provisions to call for experts from various fields, governmental and non-governmental, for consultations on all matters pertaining to procurement. The permanent staff may include experts to manage areas such as the tender and procurement processes, cost negotiations, technological, maintenance and legal areas, etc. Suitable Service officers from the military may be posted to this organisation to oversee the military's interests.

### Defining the Roles for Procurement

The appropriate authority for deciding on the type of equipment, the quantity and the priority for procurement will be the CJCS, based on his visualisation of the equipment's need and employability in a joint war-fighting scenario in accordance with the war doctrine. The qualitative requirements of the equipment for procurement will have to be decided by the Service Chiefs in consultation with user units. It will only be appropriate for the military units expected to use the equipment to carry out field trials. The final authority for approving procurement and allocation of funds will rest with the DOD. The system, thus, evolved will be broad-based and will give a sense of participation to the military at all levels in the procurement process.

It may be advisable to entrust the study for evolving systems for military acquisitions to suitable management consultants before making any half-hearted efforts and, thus, tampering with the existing procedures.

### Need for Service Secretaries

The requirement of Secretaries for military departments such as Secretary of the Army, Navy, etc. needs greater deliberation. Under the present set-up, where CJCS and Chiefs of the Services are overseeing the military, with the JCS monitoring them and the OSD exercising civil control, the Service Secretaries have become largely redundant. This is especially so in the proposed set-up.

### Restructuring the Military

Under the system proposed, since the CJCS and his team in the JCS will be employing the instruments of military power, it will only be appropriate for them to specify the shape of the military structure required to meet the needs of war-fighting. The final approval will, however, be accorded by the DOD.

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### Conclusion

Presently, China is also in the process of restructuring its military. It has dismantled the four most powerful General Departments under the Central Military Commission (CMC) that controlled its military and has created fifteen diluted 'Functional Departments', under the CMC. China's most powerful General Staff Department has been obliterated.

In the US, experts like James R. Locher III, based on professional merits, have rightly demanded that the CJCS be dismantled and a Chief of General Staff created to enhance the capabilities of the US military and the quality of military advice to the President.

China has reasons to worry about keeping the military under check as the People's Liberation Army (PLA), its military, is an instrument of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and not the

government. Its higher defence management establishment, the CMC, is devoid of any civilian official and is not under the control of the Ministry of Defence or other civil establishments till now. The US, on the other hand, has the DOD headed by the Secretary of Defence overseeing and controlling its military.

In a democracy like the US, there is no reason why the country should be concerned with the CJCS becoming more powerful and, accordingly, restrict essential professional necessities at the cost of its military's effectiveness and efficiency. For the present, the US may not create the General Staff as suggested by the experts but will do well to include the JCS, headed by the CJCS, within the ambit of the military's chain of command. Under no circumstances should some ill-conceived 'civil control of the military' or 'the CJCS becoming more powerful than the civilian bureaucrat' logic become the justification for keeping the CJCS out of the operational chain of command.

### Notes

1. Secretary of Defence Ash Carter, Remarks on "Goldwater-Nichols at 30: An Agenda for Updating" (Centre for Strategic and International Studies), U.S. Department of Defence, April 05, 2016, available at <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/714145>. Accessed on April 18, 2016.

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