

AIR POWER MUSINGS: THEATRE COMMANDS – TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

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The opening line of one of the most popular soliloquies in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "to be or not to be", very interestingly highlights the predicament before national policy-makers in India on the need for Theatre Commands.¹ In December 2019, the government announced the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and setting up of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA).² One of the mandates of the DMA was to facilitate the restructuring of military commands for optimal utilisation of resources by bringing about jointness in operations, including through the establishment of Joint or Theatre Commands.³ The core issue was the need for jointness and optimal utilisation of resources and we could go for either Joint Commands or Theatre Commands.

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1. Britannica, "To Be, Or Not To be", <https://www.britannica.com/art/To-be-or-not-to-be-speech-from-Hamlet>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.
2. Press Information Bureau India, Release ID 1597425, December 24, 2019, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1597425>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.
3. Ibid.

It would be interesting to understand why certain countries have created Theatre Commands. The United States of America created different Theatre Commands to effectively manage and coordinate their military operations around the world. Also known as Unified Combatant Commands, they are organised by geographical regions or functional areas to address specific strategic and operational needs; primarily driven by the intense inter-Service rivalry, the sub-optimal performance in the Vietnam War, the Mayaguez incident in May 1975, the failed mission to rescue US hostages in Iran in April 1980, the invasion of Grenada in October 1983 and the ill-fated navy air attack in Lebanon in December 1983.⁴ What is interesting to note is that the reforms followed successive failures and the need to set things right. As the first mover in the field of jointness, the US armed forces, post the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, modified their existing Theatre Commands and created Unified Combatant Commands. The US armed forces have operated under the new command and control structure ever since. The structures and processes have seen regular reforms to stay contemporary and relevant. Operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine are seen as examples of failure to identify and plan for future threats, the inability to set priorities, and the military's inability to deal with the future challenges.⁵ In spite of being the most technologically advanced armed forces in the world, the wars fought by them in the past four decades have stories of their own to tell and lessons for all of us to draw.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA), subsumed its seven Military Regions and reorganised them into five Theatre Commands back in 2016. Unlike the USA, these Theatre Commands do not stretch beyond China's borders but, more significantly, are based on perceived threats. The erstwhile Military Regions also had Joint Commands with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and

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4. Ufot B. Inamete, "The Unified Combatant Command System: Centerpiece of the 1986 US Armed Forces Reforms," *Expeditions with MCUP* 2022.1 (2022), <https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/Expeditions-with-MCUP-digital-journal/The-Unified-Combatant-Command-System/>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.
 5. M. Cozad, et. al., "Rethinking Jointness?: The Strategic Value of Jointness in Major Power Competition and Conflict", RAND Corporation, Research Reports, 2023, United States, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1560-1.html. Accessed on February 12, 2025.

the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) as part of the force structure in the regions. However, command and control issues and rampant corruption led to the disbandment of the Military Regions. The main aim was joint planning and integrated application of combat power. The chain of command adopted by them was similar to the US model, wherein the Central Military Commission (CMC) and its subsidiary departments would provide overall management, the theatres would focus on operations, and the Services would manage force building. This would establish two distinct chains of command for the PLA: one operational chain passing from the CMC to the theatres and then to the troops, and an administrative chain flowing from the CMC to the Service Headquarters and then to the troops. Interestingly, ever since the reforms, the PLA has not seen active combat anywhere around the world. The new structures and Command and Control (C2) systems are constantly being exercised to fine-tune and improve them. Articulation of red lines, Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) and political signalling are their way of deterring potential adversaries. However, what is interesting is the nuanced use of the cyber and information domains to create narratives and maintain deterrence through hybrid and multi-domain means. Technologically, they are second only to the US armed forces, and, in many areas, the PLA has even surpassed the USA.

India has two hostile neighbours that are geographically contiguous and political allies. India shares a 3,323 km land border with Pakistan, voted as one of the most dangerous boundaries in the world.⁶ We also share a 3,448 km land border with China,⁷ with many disputed areas. The Karakoram Highway through the Khunjerab border (596 km) between Pakistan and China is the artery that connects both our principal adversaries and is a serious cause of concern. The Indian peninsula, jutting into the Indian Ocean and flanked by the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, gives us a total coastline of 7,516 km.⁸ Relatively peaceful yet very crucial, the Indian

6. Ministry of Home Affairs, India, "International Land Border", <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/BMIntro-1011.pdf>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

Ocean Region (IOR) is critical for securing our energy and trade requirements.

Modern wars are not what they used to be. Rather, a lot has changed. Though the nature of war has not quite changed, the character of war has undergone significant changes. As Lieutenant Colonel Frank G Hoffman wrote in his article on “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges”, “The most distinctive change in the character of modern war is the blurred or blended nature of combat. We do not face a widening number of distinct challenges but their convergence into hybrid wars.”⁹As we begin to debate the scale and shape of our armed forces, a throwback into history to cull out relevant lessons might prove useful. Tomorrow’s enemies will still get a vote, and they will remain as cunning and elusive as today’s foes, if not more. They may be more lethal and more implacable. We should plan accordingly.¹⁰ The problem is going to be the response strategies to completely newer ways of war-fighting—whether kinetic, non-kinetic, lethal, or non-lethal—that are directed not only at the armed forces but at the country in general.

Envision a Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attack on Critical Information Infrastructure (CII), which may bring certain essential services like the power supply, internet, banking or terrestrial communication to a standstill. These will have direct, indirect or cascading effects across the entire nation, including the armed forces. Who will respond to such a situation? It is, after all, a direct attack on the nation and the armed forces are meant to deal with it. We talk of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) and the Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economy (DIME) concept as the sources of power of any nation. Similarly, the response options must also include all elements of national power, i.e., DIME. In order to do that, we cannot have each and every source working independently in silos, which is the case today. All elements of CNP must come together and bring out a comprehensive response strategy and this must be done at the apex level.

9. Frank G Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges”, *Joint Force Quarterly*, issue 52, 1st Quarter, 2009, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA516871.pdf>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.

10. *Ibid.*

There is a need to carry out a thorough analysis of existing structures and future requirements and, more importantly, arrive at the statement of the problem before embarking on the creation of Theatre Commands. There is a need to define the statement of the problem, which, unfortunately, has not been done. Why do we need Theatre Commands? What is wrong with the armed forces today? Should the theatres be threat-based or geography-based? How many theatres should one contiguous landmass have? What happens to Regional Commands? What kind of Order of Battle (ORBAT) will each theatre need? Do we have adequate forces to create independent theatres? Will the theatres be able to carry out multi-domain operations and deal with hybrid threats? These are only some questions that must be answered before coming to conclusions. We must avoid change just for the sake of change. An analysis of how the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces reorbated the Ukrainian armed forces, trained them for a few months, and sent them into the battlefield to fail miserably should be enough caution in the wind for all of us. Yes, there is a need for a leaner and meaner force. Yes, there is a need for a more tech-savvy force. Yes, we need a force capable of undertaking multi-domain operations, and yes, we need to fight differently.

What we need is force reconfiguration and not force restructuring. The *Harvard Business Review* defines reconfiguration as “adding, splitting, transferring, combining or dissolving business units without modifying the company’s underlying structure. Restructuring, on the other hand, involves changing the structural archetype around which resources and activities are grouped and coordinated”.¹¹ Force reconfiguration can be done to create a force capable of fighting tomorrow’s wars, but force restructuring has no benchmarks. We do not know whether the new structures will work or not. Sadly, the consequences of failure will be too hard for any one of us to absorb. Therefore, when dealing with modern wars like the ones we are witnessing in West Asia and Europe, there is a requirement to create organisations and processes that allow for joint

11. Stéphane Girod and Samina Karim “Restructure or Reconfigure: Designing the Reorg That Works for You”, *Harvard Business Review*, 2017, 95(2), pp. 128-132, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3912317>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.

planning and enable the integrated application of Comprehensive National Power (CNP). In all the wars fought by India ever since independence, the armed forces have fared reasonably well, barring a few instances. The army, navy, and air force have been drawing out their plans based on the Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive. The factors of force, space, and time were independently analysed by the three forces to draw out comprehensive plans and assistance. At no point were those plans viewed under a single lens to iron out the seams and enhance operational effectiveness. Even today, this issue remains to be addressed. Processes like appreciations, Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP), Commanders' Estimate of the Situation (CES), naval operations planning process, Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment (JIPOE), Air Operations Planning Process (AOPP) and Joint Operations Planning Process (JOPP) are varied methods to come up with the best course of action, unfortunately, for individual Services. Besides the Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive, there is no other guiding document or process for a common, comprehensive response strategy to be drawn up when faced with a contingency. The real problem, therefore, is not joint operations but joint planning.

We may first look at creating a Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ) at the apex level rather than start tinkering with operational and tactical level formations that have stood the test of time and proven themselves on the battlefield. The JFHQ must include not only the senior functionaries of the armed forces but also have equal representation of senior officials from all constituents of the CNP. Agencies like the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Multi-Agency Centre (MAC), Defence Image Processing and Analysis Centre (DIPAC), etc., must form an intrinsic part of the JFHQ and agencies like the Defence Cyber Agency (DCyA), Defence Space Agency (DSA), and National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC) must become intrinsic to the apex planning mechanism. Many would say that this is the mandate of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), but in order to come up with a comprehensive response strategy, we will have to shed silos and think differently, lest we end up fighting tomorrow's wars with yesterday's mindset. Incidentally, the Joint Operations

Centre (JOC) at the Andaman and Nicobar Command is the nerve centre for integrated planning for surveillance, conduct of operations and logistics support. The need of the hour is for the three Services to sit together and make a joint plan to carry out integrated operations.

If theatres are to be created, should they be geography-based or threat-based? Both the USA and China (none of China's adversaries has designs on Chinese territory) do not have hot borders like India does. The USA has made theatres based on geography, and all theatres are separate geographical entities that do not directly affect each other, and, hence need independent force structures. China has created the Western Theatre Command (WTC) to look after India and Russia, while the other theatres are primarily focussed on Taiwan, the South and East China Seas and other interests of China in that region. These commands serve as functional blocks of forces, tied to China's essential defence and operational needs, focussing on their Northern, Eastern, and Southern Theatres—the key areas where China needs coherent military contingency plans and operational control.¹²

Another facet that warrants mention here is the number of Theatre Commands. If created based on geography, there can only be two, i.e. Maritime and Land Theatres, lest we get embroiled in tactical issues like mountain terrain, riverine terrain, desert terrain and urban terrain. If we look at it from the threat perspective, again, there can only be two, given the threats we face on our western and northern borders. Threats in the maritime domain would emanate from either the western or the northern adversary and will be handled by that particular theatre. Neither the USA nor China has a dedicated maritime theatre. Just like roles and tasks in the land and air domains, the maritime one should be a role of the western and northern theatres. Protecting India's maritime territorial integrity and other maritime interests would, therefore, become an intrinsic responsibility of the two Theatre Commands. Do we need an additional maritime theatre?

12. Anthony H. Cordesman, and Joseph Kendall, "Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2016: A Comparative Analysis", Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2016, pp. 182–211. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23376.8>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.

The Indian armed forces are placed directly under the command of the three Service chiefs. They are responsible for the conduct of operations, Raise, Train and Sustain (RTS) functions as well as a host of other essential maintenance and administrative tasks that are key towards the conduct of operations. The Service chiefs are ably supported by Principal Staff Officers (PSOs) who head various divisions responsible for the smooth conduct of operational, maintenance and administrative activities. If operational units have limited control over training and sustainment, there could be a mismatch, which could affect operations adversely. Therefore, the decision needs to be based on India's organisational culture and strategic objectives. The chiefs must continue to spearhead operations, no matter what structure is created, because of the way the armed forces have been structured. Whether we reconfigure or restructure, the role of the chiefs of the army, navy and air force must not get diluted to purely RTS because they have been mandated to prosecute war and conduct operations. Future wars will require centralised command with distributed control and decentralised execution and the Service chiefs' role will be very crucial. The Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) headed by the CDS will play a vital role in strategic decision-making at the apex level and giving military decisions and directions to the JFHQ for planning of future operations. If the Service chiefs were to look after only the RTS functions, a very effective and essential structure like the COSC would become redundant. In order to successfully prosecute future wars, joint planning and integrated application of combat power would prove decisive and that must remain the aim of reforms. Inter-Service rivalries, ownership of assets, need for under-command assets and pro-rata allocation of resources are what have got us to where we are and for India to be able to get out of this quagmire, there is a need to rethink our priorities.

A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

Amongst many alternatives like threat-based or geography-based Theatre Commands or a combination of both, it would be prudent to first create the JFHQ and then move onto the next process of either reconfiguring or restructuring the armed forces of India. The accruing advantages from a JFHQ in terms of unity of command,

streamlined control verticals, resource allocation, prioritisation, and, more importantly, capability and capacity building would make war-fighting easier and better coordinated. It would also help tide over certain issues like parochialism and help build a modern force. Reconfiguring vis-à-vis restructuring is a serious decision we must make before embarking on any one path. National power can no longer be applied through single-purpose focussed entities, especially in a conflict.¹³ The present environment calls for deeper and further integration of capabilities, systems, and concepts across the joint force to enhance deterrence, enable defensive and offensive multi-domain operations, and achieve laid down objectives.¹⁴ We do not want to create structures that would drain resources, become top-heavy, and have multiple decision-making layers. We may look at the creation of operational, geographically focussed Joint Task Forces (JTFs) to deal with different dimensions of modern war-fighting. These joint task forces would be specialised formations to handle developing contingencies across the entire spectrum of warfare. The advantage of such a force would be the availability of specialised formations for specific roles and tasks based on domain expertise, which would include all elements essential for prosecuting modern wars. Like in combined arms warfare, infantry provides flexibility and reconnaissance, tanks provide mobile fires, aircraft deliver concentrated firepower, and helicopters provide battlefield mobility. Similarly, in the JTFs, navies could project power on land, air forces would shape the battlefield, everyone would rely on satellite communications and intelligence, and mutual cooperation across all domains would create war-fighting synergy.¹⁵ The '*sine qua non*' of modern war-fighting is to make our combat-capable forces combat-credible.

Just as Hamlet contemplates death and suicide, weighing the pain and unfairness of life against the alternative, which might be

13. Kelly Mccoy, "The World the Combatant Command was Designed for is Gone," *War on the Rocks*, October 7, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/the-world-the-combatant-command-was-designed-for-is-gone/>. Accessed on February 12, 2025.

14. Ibid.

15. Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsay, "The U.S. Department of Deterrence," *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-u-s-department-of-deterrence/>. Accessed on October 23, 2024.

worse, the choice is ours to make and for our future generations to judge. Decisions taken today will remain in vogue for the next few decades and, therefore, must be nuanced, balanced, well thought out and, more importantly, aimed at fighting and winning tomorrow's wars.