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Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands – Redux

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In the aftermath of Operation *Sindoor*, social and print media have been abuzz with the importance of creating Theatre Commands (TC), giving the debate a new impetus. Many papers and scholarly articles have started criticising the Indian Air Force (IAF) for creating delays in the creation of Theatre Commands. Recent remarks by the Chief of Air Staff have been misinterpreted and are now being openly discredited/challenged by many, who, in their learned opinion, cite the IAF's reservations on the idea of theaterisation primarily on grounds of paucity of assets and the concept of indivisibility of this strategic resource as the only reason for the IAF's reluctance.¹ There are many reasons for IAF's nuanced stand, and these are only two of them. This so-called ongoing battle of narratives by social and print media, hopefully not driven by ulterior motives, should have been more productive post Balakot or during Op-*Sindoor*, but unfortunately, there was no national coherence where it mattered the most. It was only sensationalism, viewer ratings and hits on X (formerly Twitter) that mattered. This article aims to clarify certain essential issues pertaining to theatres and Theatre Commands, and also to argue that India needs to be one theatre operating under the unified command and control of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) with the Chiefs of the three services as operational entities.

Two related yet distinct concepts are presently being confused to proliferate one school of thought that India requires TCs. 'Theatre of War' and 'Theatre of Operations' are two terms that must be understood in their entirety before arriving at sweeping conclusions.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a Theatre of War as "the entire land, sea and air area that is or may become involved directly in war operations."¹ Clausewitz further defines a theatre as a self-contained portion of a larger conflict, geographically separated and large enough that actions in other theatres only have an indirect effect on it. The key words here are '**geographically separated**' and '**indirect effect**'. World War II was primarily fought across distinct theatres; the European, Pacific, Mediterranean, African, and the Middle East theatres. A theatre may have multiple fronts where battle is waged, and these fronts may be termed as theatres of operation. The 1971 war between India and Pakistan had one theatre, i.e., the India-Pakistan theatre (threat-based) and two fronts: Western and Eastern. Theatre objectives are generally singular in nature and represent the larger strategy, while frontal objectives may differ, aligning with the overall grand strategy of the theatre.

A theatre of operations is a sub-area within a theatre of war. Its boundaries are defined by a specific commander to support particular combat operations over an extended period. Outcomes of battle in theatres of operations have a direct impact on the theatre of war. The 1971 Indo-Pak war clearly highlighted the need for unified Command and Control (C2) at the front level, where operations were being conducted, specifically on the Western and Eastern fronts. All operations were coordinated and planned at the central level (apex) by the three service Chiefs and the COSC. In more recent times, the use of terminology like 'two-front war' and 'two-front strategy' refers to India simultaneously facing Pakistan on the Western front and China on the Northern front. Nowhere do we talk of the two fronts as two distinct theatres of war; instead, they are always referred to as two theatres of operation within a larger theatre of war, that is, India.

Several key facts must be considered and discussed before making strategic decisions, as presented here. Firstly, a force ratio of 9:1 is optimal for carrying out offensive actions in mountainous terrain. Similarly, a force ratio of 3:1 is essential for launching effective offensives in the plains sector by the land forces. When we combine these two minimum requirements in the Indian context, India does not have the land forces necessary to carry out effective offensive action simultaneously across the two fronts. So, when the IAF says that there is a paucity of assets, it is also true for the Indian Army. Given adequate assets, there would be no need to resort to a compromised force structure. The problem is that we are starting with a compromised force structure, which would lead to a compromised action plan. Therefore, the need to treat India as one theatre becomes all the more imperative. Some news articles argue that the three Services have agreed to the formation of Theatre Commands, and because significant deliberations have been undertaken, the creation of TCs must be continued. If 'fait accompli' were to decide matters of national security, India has already lost the next war. We cannot and should not let fait accompli happen. National security is far too serious a business to be left to a fait accompli, simply because significant discussions have already taken place.

Secondly, Op *Sindoor* has effectively brought out the importance of joint planning at the apex level and the integrated application of combat power at the operational level. Why then are we trying to fix something which isn't broken? On the other hand, we are not addressing the snake in the house. There is a need to create permanent joint structures at the apex level, which are essential for effective joint planning. That is the need of the hour. Force structures can then subsequently be developed. Therefore, the need is for force reconfiguration, not force restructuring.² There is a need to look at this from the top down rather than bottom up. Creation of a Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ) at the apex level is strategically and operationally essential. The JFHQ should be headed by the CDS and the three Chiefs as part of the COSC, and all higher directions of war must emanate from this establishment to ensure unity of command. The constituents of JFHQ must represent all

arms of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) and should be all-encompassing. For the execution of JFHQ's directions, there is a need to create executive organisations at the theatre of operations level, namely the two fronts: Western and Northern.

Thirdly, there is speculation that India may opt for a three-tier TC structure, comprising two threat-based and one geography-based theatre. Yet again, rather than being pragmatic, we are being diplomatic so that all three services get their own slice of the pie. National security must not succumb to such pressures and must examine the problem statement from the point of view of efficacy and effectiveness. Let us analyse this more deeply. If, hypothetically, India were at war with China, the threat-based Northern TC would be activated and directed to take on all operations while the other threat-based Western TC would adopt a higher readiness posture. What would the geography-based Southern/Maritime TC do and how would it operate? Will naval forces on the Eastern Seaboard of India be placed under the command of the Northern Theatre Commander or operate independently? If placed under command, the question arises, why in the first place was the Southern TC created when forces were going to operate under the Northern TC? If they operate independently, the problem of unity of command arises. Either way, the situation is sub-optimal. This is primarily because we are starting with a compromise, and therefore, the end result will also be a compromise.

Fourthly, there has been considerable discussion about the Army's initiative to create Integrated Battle Groups (IBG). This has been an ongoing process since 2017 and has yet to see the light of day. An integrated battle group at the tactical and operational level is a brilliant idea, but at the strategic level, do we really need such purely army entities, or can we now start looking at Joint Task Forces (JTFs), which are created, equipped, trained, and exercised for specialised integrated operations in different terrain. JTFs are task forces comprising all three services (where applicable), as well as other arms and support ancillaries, for the integrated application and sustenance of combat power. Do we need TCs to create such a force? National power can no longer be effectively applied through single-purpose, focused entities, especially in times of conflict.³ Like in combined arms warfare, infantry would give the necessary flexibility and essential boots on the ground, tanks would provide mobile fires, aircraft would deliver concentrated firepower, helicopters would provide battlefield mobility, and satellites would provide the visibility to reduce the fog of war. Similarly, in the JTFs, navies could project power on land, and air forces would shape the battlefield. Everyone would rely on satellite communications and cooperation across all domains would create warfighting synergy.⁴

Lastly, but most importantly, what is the problem statement? The problems plaguing India's higher defence organisation are aplenty. Starting from joint planning, capability development plans, research and development concepts, procurement processes, civil-military relations (CMR), inter-

services rivalry, the desire to get everyone under-command, ownership of assets, lack of strategic guidance, accountability and responsibility, hegemony of Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), minimal participation by the private industry, severe shortage of manpower in the armed forces, a burgeoning yet ineffective bureaucracy, and absence of in-house niche technology are to name a few. While solutions to these problems are beyond the scope of this paper, it may suffice to say that, they are all inter-related and need to be addressed. The creation of a JFHQ may not solve all these problems. but definitely go a long way in systematically addressing these challenges and problems and identifying ways to mitigate them. We must start where it matters the most, and that is to create structures that would help us plan and fight tomorrow's wars. The future is unknown, but the past is known. The present allows us the opportunity to ameliorate our mistakes and secure our future. We should do it the right way.

NOTES:

¹ "Military Theaterisation in India: Is the Air Chief Right?," *Bharat Shakti*, September 24, 2025, <https://bharatshakti.in/military-theaterisation-in-india-is-the-air-chief-right/>. Accessed on September 24, 2025.

² V P Naik, "Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands- To be or not to be?," *Defence and Diplomacy Journal*, Vol 14, No. 2, 2025 (January to March), pp. 77-86, <https://capssindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/7-VP-Naik.pdf>. Accessed on September 24, 2025.

³ 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.

⁴ 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 September 23, 2025.