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## From History to Myths — A Naval Officer's Dialogue Part I: The Idea of Jointness: Beyond Structure and Slogan

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## Setting the Stage

Among the many contributions to India's debate on jointness are two essays on the *Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies* (CAPSS) portal by Wing Commander A. Pichipoo Raja. His earlier piece, "*Revisiting the Eight-Decade History of Indian Jointness: Drawing the Right Lessons from Op Sindoor*,"<sup>1</sup> traced the evolution of India's inter-service integration. His later article, "*08 Myths in Indian Debates on the Theatre Command*,"<sup>2</sup> builds on that foundation—trying to bring discipline to a discussion that has often been shaped more by sentiment than by evidence.

Both essays mark a welcome maturity in professional debate and, in an oblique way, remind us that the Air Force's caution is often misread. What some see as reluctance is, in truth, doctrinal logic: a concern for coherence, unity, and agility. Before judging what needs to change, it is essential to understand why the Indian Air Force (IAF) thinks as it does—and how it could, in fact, lead India's transition to genuine jointness.

## Early Roots of Jointness

In his first of the two articles referred to here, Wing Commander Raja suggests that the idea of theaterisation arose to address India's "lack of jointness," tracing its roots to 1944, when he links the origins of jointness to the founding story of the National Defence Academy (NDA), using the Sudan Block donation as a symbolic anchor. That is partly right, though the deeper roots lie in Britain's wartime experience.

The campaigns of 1939–45 showed how badly the Services faltered when they operated in silos. The setbacks in France, North Africa, Greece, and the Far East were not just tactical defeats—they were failures of coordination between the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Only after repeated reverses did joint planning and staff education become central to success. By the time of Normandy and Burma, integration had matured: General Eisenhower's headquarters in Europe and Admiral Lord Mountbatten's South East Asia Command demonstrated how air-land-sea cooperation, properly institutionalised, could turn friction into synergy.

As an alumnus of the NDA, I still remember quiet Sunday mornings spent in the library after breakfast—hours lost in military history that gave us our first authentic taste of joint thinking. Has that early exposure in jointness at the NDA fully percolated to the echelons of the Indian Military?

## The DSSC and Its Limits

India established the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) at Wellington even before the National Defence Academy (NDA) came up at Khadakwasla. Its core focus, however, has mainly remained single-service — given the Army's central role under an Army Commandant and its mission, much like Quetta before it, to prepare junior staff officers for mid-level formations.

This was not for lack of vision. The second Commandant, Major General W. D. A. Lentaigne, had to take it up with the then Governor-General, Admiral Lord Mountbatten, to convince the Defence Minister that the new college had to be tri-Service — a move the Army initially resisted but one that made DSSC India's first real step toward integrated professional education.<sup>3</sup>

Over time, DSSC has evolved into a respected postgraduate, mid-career institution, yet its joint curriculum remains more a conversation than a culture. General Lentaigne himself once remarked, "I only wish the Army could cut down its syllabus and also get more time for research and discussion."<sup>4</sup> The college's history notes that as Army subjects multiplied, the Naval and Air Wings pressed for greater combined and joint instruction to balance their programmes.

It is not the aim of this submission to get into the subtleties of words used, like *training* and *education*, but readers would benefit if they read through the author's writings on the subject.<sup>5</sup>

## Personal Ties and Professional Distance

Wing Commander Raja notes the personal bonds among recent Chiefs — NDA coursemates and Sainik School Rewa classmates — as examples of natural synergy. These connections are real, but they do not automatically create operational integration. If friendship alone could guarantee jointness, India would have achieved it long ago.

When the government accepted the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) and Group of Ministers' (GoM) recommendations to establish the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), the three Chiefs then in office were all my own NDA contemporaries. Yet that did not by itself deliver integration. At the highest levels, professionalism outweighs personality. Structures, doctrine, and accountability—not nostalgia—bind the Services together.

I saw this clearly as Chief of Staff at the Andaman and Nicobar Command. One Commander-in-Chief and the Lieutenant Governor were, coincidentally, classmates at Sainik School Rewa—the very school Wing Commander Raja mentions. Yet their conduct was always defined by role, not relationship. Professional distance kept both focused on duty. Familiarity can ease communication, but it never substitutes for institutional design.

## Revisiting the “Eight Myths”

Raja’s *08 Myths* article aims to clear the fog that surrounds the theaterisation debates. It succeeds in re-centering the argument on evidence rather than emotion. But the real task is to link these “myths” to the broader history of reform—from the KRC and GoM to the Naresh Chandra Task Force and the Shekatkar Committee. Together, they form India’s official reform continuum. Once accepted *in principle* by the government, their recommendations gain directive weight even if implementation remains uneven.

Seen that way, the debate should not be about whose view prevails but about how to build common purpose. The aim here is not to impose a non-IAF perspective, but to offer, for an Air Force audience, a structured way forward—a method amid the noise.

## Lessons from Kargil and *Sindoor*

Readers seeking a deeper anchor might look to my chapter “*Lessons from the Andaman and Nicobar Command*” in *Force in Statecraft: An Indian Perspective*. It recalls the winter of 1998–99, when Pakistan’s Operation *Badr* led to the Kargil War and to two separate Indian responses—Operation *Vijay* by the Army and Operation *Safed Sagar* by the Indian Air Force.<sup>6</sup>

As AVM Arjun Subramaniam notes, had the Army involved the IAF from day one, a single integrated plan could have exploited both Services’ strengths and covered their weaknesses. That insight remains strikingly relevant. Operation *Sindoor* again showed individual brilliance within each Service but exposed the absence of a unified design. The lesson from Kargil and *Sindoor* alike is not about our people or platforms, but about how we plan together. True jointness requires shared understanding, confidence, and a structure that aligns authority with purpose.<sup>7</sup>

## Myths and Realities of Reform

Wing Commander Raja’s effort to separate fact from belief is valuable, but facts must be translated into design. Major General Alok Deb makes this point in “*Kargil and its Impact on India’s National Security*.”<sup>8</sup> His reading of the KRC and GoM reports shows that, even if the term “*theatre command*” wasn’t used, the intent toward integration was clear. The committees’ reforms—the Integrated Defence Staff, the Defence Intelligence Agency, the Strategic Forces Command, and the Andaman & Nicobar Command—were all steps toward jointness. The CDS and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) represent a significant political step that places the onus on the militaries to get their act together.

For a fuller view, readers should explore the *Journal of Defence Studies* special issue “*National Security since Kargil*,” which offers a 360-degree review of India’s progress two decades after the conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Raja is also correct that reform in India has evolved through context and experience, not declarations. Our path to jointness has been deliberate, incremental, and built through learning rather than slogans.

The claim that India’s jointness “problem” lacks empirical proof confuses the absence of audit with adequacy. Without a structured review, neither strengths nor gaps are known. India still lacks cross-service mechanisms to analyse operations collectively. Lessons remain trapped within individual Services and seldom shape doctrine or training. A Joint Operations Review Board (JORB) under the National Security Council Secretariat—or the CDS—could fill that gap, turning anecdote into evidence. The Army’s Headquarters Army Training Command (HQ ARTRAC) has a Lessons Learnt system, but do we have a joint Lessons Learnt system?

### **Learning from Others**

Raja’s reading of the United States (US) experience is broadly correct but incomplete. Unified Commands existed well before 1986; what the *Goldwater–Nichols Act* changed, as Gordon Nathaniel Lederman explains in *Reorganizing the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Goldwater–Nichols Act of 1986*, was alignment, not architecture.<sup>10</sup> The Act enforced clarity—who commands, who is accountable, and who advances for joint performance. It linked professional reward to joint competence and turned what had been an organisational chart into a living system.

The caution that theaterisation alone cannot deliver jointness is well-taken. Structures succeed only when supported by doctrine, education, and incentives. The lesson from abroad is not imitation but adaptation—building systems that fit our realities while preserving each Service’s ethos and aligning all to a common strategic purpose.

### **Beyond Structure**

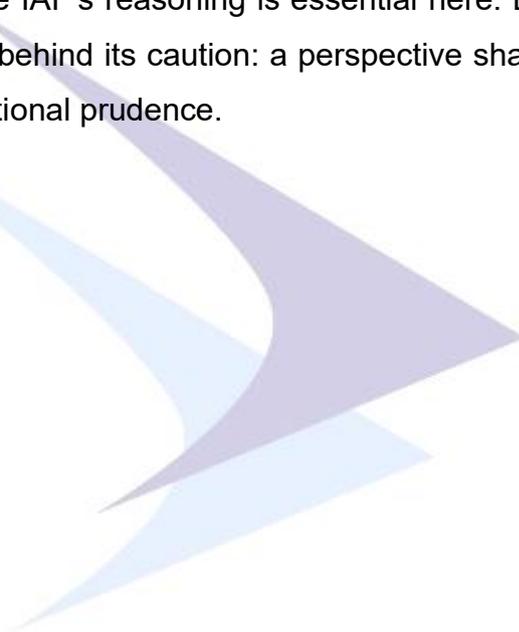
Theatre commands are meant to unify command—to bring planning, resources, and execution under one operational authority. That purpose is sound and long overdue. But unity of command is not the same as unity of purpose. Real jointness grows from shared education and professional incentives that make officers think and act as one, even when they wear different uniforms. Without that intellectual and doctrinal foundation, theatre commands risk becoming hollow frameworks—united in form but divided in spirit.

The final myth—that theaterisation is politically driven—needs nuance. In China, the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) 2015 reforms certainly strengthened Party control, yet they also produced real operational integration.<sup>11</sup> Under Xi Jinping’s centralised leadership, structural change combined with a genuine “military intellectual revolution” born of debate, international study, and relentless field experimentation. Political will can push reform, but professional depth must sustain it.<sup>12</sup>

## The Way Ahead

Taken together, these insights repair the record but leave open the core question: how do we turn factual clarity into functional reform?

If the first part of this debate has explained *why* jointness matters—the habits of thought, education, and incentives that must underpin reform—the next must ask *how* those principles can work in practice. Understanding the IAF’s reasoning is essential here. Before prescribing change, one must first appreciate the logic behind its caution: a perspective shaped not by reluctance, but by doctrine, experience, and operational prudence.



## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> A Pichipoo Raja, "Revisiting the Eight Decade History of Indian Jointness: Drawing the Right Lessons from Op Sindoor," Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS), October 03, 2025, <https://capssindia.org/revisiting-the-eight-decade-history-of-indian-jointness-drawing-the-right-lessons-from-op-sindoor/>. Accessed on October 26, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> A Pichipoo Raja, "08 Myths in Indian Debates on the Theatre Command- A Ready Reckoner for the Pursuit of Informed Discussions," Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS), October 10, 2025, <https://capssindia.org/08-myths-in-indian-debates-on-the-theatre-command-a-ready-reckoner-for-the-pursuit-of-informed-discussions/>. Accessed on October 26, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> R. D. Palsokar, *A History of the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington* (New Delhi: Natraj Publishers, 1997), pp. 56-58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> For earlier discussions on this subject, see Sudhir Pillai, "Faculty at DSSC – A Necessity of Professional Military Education," *Trishul Journal* 17, no. 2, Spring 2015; Sudhir Pillai, "Schooled to Think," *Force Magazine*, January 2018; and Sudhir Pillai, "Change with Times: Indian Professional Military Education System Needs Urgent Reform," *Force Magazine*, November 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Sudhir Pillai, "Lessons from the Andaman and Nicobar Command," in *Force in Statecraft: An Indian Perspective*, ed. Arjun Subramaniam and Anil Chopra (New Delhi: National Defence College and KW Publishers, 2021), pp. 283–305.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>8</sup> Alok Deb, "Kargil and Its Impact on India's National Security," *Journal of Defence Studies*, vol.13, no. 3, July–September 2019, [Kargil and Its Impact on India's National Security](#). Accessed on October 25, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> National Security Since Kargil, *Journal of Defence Studies* vol.13, no. 3, July–September 2019, [Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 13, No. 3, July-September 2019 - MP-IDSA](#). Accessed on October 25, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Nathaniel Lederman, *Reorganizing the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Goldwater–Nichols Act of 1986* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Brian Lafferty, "Civil Military Integrations and PLA Reforms," *National Defence University Press*, February 05, 2019, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1748777/civil-military-integrations-and-pla-reforms/>. Accessed on October 25, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Sugiura Yasuyuki, "The PLA's Pursuit of Enhanced Joint Operations Capabilities," *NIDS China Security Report*, 2022, [https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china\\_report\\_EN\\_web\\_2022\\_A02.pdf](https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/publication/chinareport/pdf/china_report_EN_web_2022_A02.pdf). Accessed on October 25, 2025.