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## From History to Myths — A Naval Officer's Dialogue Part II: From Coordination to Command — Designing India's Joint Future

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## Introduction

The first part of this discussion looked at *why* jointness matters — the habits and mindsets that must precede structure. This part turns to *how* those ideas might evolve in practice. Having observed the Air Force's journey from both maritime and joint vantage points, I find its caution doctrinally sound — not defensive, but disciplined. What appears to some as resistance is, in fact, professional logic: the instinct to preserve flexibility, unity, and clarity of command as one enters significant efforts at integration. Understanding *why* the Indian Air Force (IAF) thinks as it does is essential before judging *what* must change — and how the Service can, in fact, lead the process.

## The Air Force Perspective

The IAF's position is rooted in doctrine, not defensiveness. Indeed, air power is, by design, a single, flexible national instrument. Aircraft and sensors can shift across fronts within hours, concentrating effect where it matters most. Dividing those assets among multiple theatre commanders could fragment effort and dilute unity. Command of the air, therefore, must remain a national responsibility.

Such caution reflects professional discipline. Air power thrives on agility, but agility depends on coherence. As Brigadier General J. D. Hittle observed in *The Military Staff: Its History and Development*, the true strength of command lies in firm direction from the top combined with initiative at every level.<sup>1</sup> Centralised planning and decentralised execution remain the bedrock of effective operations.

Recent Air Chiefs have consistently urged that doctrine, networks, and training must come before structure.<sup>2</sup> That sequence is sound. It reminds policymakers that integration should enhance agility, not erase it. From my own experience in joint planning environments, this emphasis on sequencing is professional caution rooted in operational realism.

## Historical Models of Balance

History offers lessons in how strong commanders and strong staffs can rationalise the contradictions that are the military.

*South East Asia Command (SEAC):* Admiral Lord Mountbatten relied on his Chiefs of Staff — Brigadier Francis Festing and later Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Browning — to knit together Army, Navy, and Air operations across a vast, under-resourced theatre. As Arthur J. Marder notes

in *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Pacific War 1942–1945*, even Admiral Lord Mountbatten's clashes with Admiral Sir James Somerville showed that shared Service identity cannot replace structured oversight.<sup>3</sup>

*Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF)*: In Europe, General Dwight Eisenhower and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder turned coordination into unity. Drawing on lessons from the Middle East, Tedder urged a unified air command and direct access for ground commanders to call air support.<sup>4</sup> It was this blend of central planning and frontline flexibility that made SHAEF an exemplar of joint command.

*Patton and Weyland*: The partnership between General George Patton's Third Army and Brigadier General Otto Weyland's XIX Tactical Air Command demonstrated real jointness. Their staff shared maps, radios, and urgency. As David N. Spires notes in *Air Power for Patton's Army*, their effectiveness came from shared education, mutual trust, and a clear divide between central planning and decentralised execution.<sup>5</sup>

*Montgomery and de Guingand*: General Bernard Montgomery's close partnership with his Chief of Staff, Major General Francis de Guingand, showed how command and dissent can coexist productively. De Guingand tested assumptions, filtered information, and ensured that plans aligned with the commander's intent — precisely the role envisaged by Scharnhorst and Moltke, two military geniuses who offer many lessons two centuries later.<sup>6</sup>

From these cases flows a consistent truth: empowered staff strengthen, rather than weaken, command.

## The Modern Staff Logic

As Charles Edward White notes in *The Enlightened Soldier*, Scharnhorst conceived of the General Staff as “a system of brains” — a collective intellect designed to ensure that strategy was tested by logic rather than driven by personality. Scharnhorst created the General Staff as a *professional counterweight to command* officers trained to test plans, challenge assumptions, and ensure that decisions followed logic, not impulse.<sup>7</sup> Moltke refined this idea: staff officers were to think, not just assist, and to exercise independent responsibility within the commander's intent.<sup>8</sup> This institutionalised professional dissent makes it a form of discipline rather than disobedience.

## Institutional Balance through Staff Design

For the Indian Air Force — operating alongside an Army of far greater size and presence — balance must come from institutional design, not numerical equivalence. Mass cannot be matched, but

structure can offset scale. The Prussian reformers Scharnhorst and Moltke demonstrated that intellect could compensate for numbers: a “system of brains” where analysis, critique, and command coexisted in productive tension.

India can adapt that principle through a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) supported by an empowered Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS). The CDS–VCDS axis could serve as an institutional counterweight — one focused on direction, the other on disciplined dissent — ensuring that strategy benefits from dialogue, not deference. For the IAF, this balance may be necessary to preserve its culture of procedural precision and doctrinal clarity within a joint framework that values questioning as much as compliance.

### **The Commonwealth Legacy and Its Limits**

The Indian military did not inherit the Prussian model; it inherited the British one — efficient, orderly, but wary of internal debate. In Britain (and in colonial India), aristocrats and senior officers long commanded not just with strategy but with rank and class, treating staff as advisers rather than partners.

At Waterloo, Prussian liaison to the headquarters of Wellington General von Müffling urged two British commanders to seize a fleeting opportunity against Napoleon’s Imperial Guard. Both agreed, but refused to act without written orders, fearing court-martial if they did. Wellington later confirmed that such an initiative would indeed have been punished. It was a system built on control, not trust.<sup>9</sup>

That instinct would carry into the Royal Air Force (RAF) through its Army lineages, and from there to the Indian Air Force. The RAF headquarters were organised by functional branches — operations, plans, maintenance, and administration — without a system of an empowered Chief of Staff. The design delivered efficiency but discouraged institutional challenge. The IAF inherited this form almost intact: precise, methodical, and professional, yet inclined toward compliance rather than contest.

### **Managing Large Air Formations vs All-Domain Forces**

The IAF’s centralised command model is highly effective within the air domain. Large formations drawn from different bases can be tasked as a single instrument, with tight vertical control ensuring precision and responsiveness. From personal experience, such centralisation works superbly in air operations, where speed and concentration are decisive.

But managing an all-domain force is a different challenge. Air operations shift in hours; land and maritime campaigns unfold over days; cyber and space effects operate on entirely different temporal scales. A Commander responsible for land, sea, air, cyber, and space must orchestrate *effects*, not simply allocate sorties. That requires a lateral staff structure where domain specialists plan together, share data, and challenge each other's assumptions in real time.

Air component planning thrives on centralisation; joint command thrives on collaboration. The task before the IAF is not to abandon its precision but to extend it — to translate air-power discipline into a joint habit of dialogue and co-design. Only when staff from every Service can think, argue, and decide together will India's theatre commands move from intent to effect.

### **From Coordination to Command**

The relationship between command and staff is, as noted earlier, not just structural but also symbolic. Rank conveys authority, but how command interacts with staff reveals the maturity of that authority. Before the Ajai Vikram Singh Committee reforms, hierarchy made this distinction clear: the staff advised, command decided. After rank parity blurred those lines, the Army has notionally reintroduced clarity through distinct command and staff streams — reaffirming that direction, not designation, defines authority.

As India now attempts to design integrated commands, this semiotic balance becomes critical. Theatre commands will require staff who can question without overstepping, and commanders who can decide without silencing debate. That equilibrium — advice without rivalry, command without insularity — is what will turn integration from structure into strategy.

India's reform journey — from the Kargil Review Committee (1999) to the Group of Ministers (2001), the Naresh Chandra Task Force (2012), and the Shekatkar Committee (2016) — culminated in the creation of the CDS and the Department of Military Affairs (2019). The Inter-Services Organisations (ISO) Act (2023) added a legal framework, but one primarily administrative; it governs people and discipline, not missions or operational direction.

Five years on, we have *coordination without command*. Authority is dispersed among four coequal Chiefs, leading to caution when decisiveness is required. Theatre Commanders remain three-star officers, junior to the four-star Service Chiefs whose forces they must lead. In a hierarchy-sensitive military, this imbalance weakens confidence and clouds authority.<sup>10</sup>

The Goldwater–Nichols Act (1986) in the United States resolved the same issue by raising theatre commanders to four-star parity, aligning rank, responsibility, and remit. India can learn from the logic of that Act— consistent with the Commanders-in-Chief (Change in Designation) Act

(1955)<sup>11</sup> — without creating a politically sensitive “supreme commander.” Aligning rank, responsibility, and remit is not cosmetic; it is the foundation of credible command.

### Toward a Balanced Joint System

There are glimpses of what this could look like. Air Marshal K. K. “Timmy” Nohwar’s tenure as Chief of Staff at the **Andaman and Nicobar Command** — the only time an Air Officer has held that post — proved that when officers step outside Service silos, the quality of joint planning improves. This is as told to me by his Commander-in-Chief, Andaman and Nicobar Command (CINCAN).

Building on such precedent, India could:

- (a) Get the post of CDS, like so much else in defence reform, to be rotational. Jointness isn’t rocket science — it’s just common sense, applied consistently.
- (b) Appoint a four-star VCDS from another Service as the CDS’s counter-ego, safeguarding diversity of perspective;
- (c) Transform HQ IDS from a coordinating secretariat into a Joint Staff HQ, the analytical and doctrinal core;
- (d) Legally distinguish Administrative Control (ADCON) from Operational Control (OPCON);
- (e) Create a Permanent Joint Operations HQ under the CDS with regional hubs (pilot projects could be a maritime command and possibly the Central Command);
- (f) Establish a Joint Operations Fund, ring-fenced under parliamentary oversight, to finance ISR, cyber, logistics, and training, gradually pooling Service budgets.

Such steps would shift reform from paperwork to purpose — where law provides the foundation, structure provides direction, and funding provides the muscle.

### Conclusion — From Clarity to Coherence

As a person who has pushed Critical Thinking from about 2015 till recently at the faculty and students of DSSC, Wing Commander Raja’s work is valuable in helping restore factual clarity to a debate too often clouded by sentiment. But clarity is only the beginning. Five years after creating the CDS, we still have *coordination without command* — structure without synthesis.

For jointness to mature, India must separate ADCON from OPCON, build a permanent operational core, align rank with responsibility, and embed joint education early in Service careers. The IAF, with its tradition of disciplined planning and mission precision, is best placed to lead this evolution. If it can carry its internal coherence into the joint arena, India's Armed Forces will move decisively — from coordination to command, and from clarity to coherence.

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> J. D. Hittle, *The Military Staff: Its History and Development* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1961; Kindle ed.), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh, remarks at *Ran Samvaad*, Mhow, August 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *Old Friends, New Enemies: The Pacific War 1942–45* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander* (New York: Doubleday, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> David N. Spires, *Air Power for Patton's Army* (Washington, DC: USAF History and Museums Program, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947); Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General 1887–1942* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Edward White, *The Enlightened Soldier: Scharnhorst and the Militärische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801–1805* (New York: Praeger, 1989; Kindle edition).

<sup>8</sup> Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel J. Hughes (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993; Kindle edition).

<sup>9</sup> White, n. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Sudhir Pillai, "Theaterisation Reform Is Stuck on Ranks and Roles — India's Military Needs Clarity," *The Print*, September 25, 2025, <https://theprint.in/opinion/theaterisation-reform-is-stuck-on-ranks-and-roles-india-military/2750307/>. Accessed on October 27, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Law, Government of India, "The Commanders-in-Chief (Change in Designation) Act, 1955. Act No. 19 of 1955," May 03, 1955, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/repealedfileopen?filename=A1955-19.pdf>. Accessed on October 28, 2025.