

Air Power Musings

When Structure Lags Strategy: The Theatre Command Fallacy



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India Cannot Fight Tomorrow's Wars with Yesterday's Mindset...

Timely Reforms Reflect Strategic Coherence...

This article is a continuation of the series of papers on theatre commands published earlier. *Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands - To Be or Not to Be* (published in CAPSS Journal, Defence and Diplomacy, <https://capssindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/7-VP-Naik.pdf>, *Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands Redux* (Published on CAPSS website, In Focus, <https://capssindia.org/air-power-musings-theatre-commands-redux/>) and India's Higher Defence Reforms: Tactical Brilliance or Strategic Coherence, <https://capssindia.org/indias-higher-defence-reforms-tactical-brilliance-or-strategic-coherence/> published as an Expert View article on CAPSS' website brought out certain issues that need to be considered before embarking on key reforms directed at war fighting and national security.

India's Defence Reforms Over the Years

For much of the 20th Century, the armed forces have been organised as geographical entities tasked with protecting threats to a nation's sovereignty. The Indian Armed Forces were orbatted to take on

threats from land, sea and air, albeit sequentially, linearly and more importantly, predictably. Shortcomings in India's war-fighting mechanism have been highlighted by various studies, yet, as a nation, India has failed to address them through timely and relevant corrective measures. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) was set up to analyse operational shortcomings and recommend systemic reforms within India's Higher Defence Organisation (HDO). The 2000-2001 Group of Ministers (GoM) reviewed the KRC report on reforming India's HDO; however, as a nation, we paid lip service to both reports. Service Headquarters (SHQ) were redesignated as the Integrated Headquarters (HQ) of the Defence Services, without real integration. Organisations such as the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) were established to streamline India's intelligence machinery, yet we have seen subsequent intelligence failures, from Doklam to Eastern Ladakh and from Pahalgam to Pulwama. The National Defence University was supposed to have been set up in earnest, but the idea was dissolved faster than it could be set up. The Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) was created in 2001 to foster tri-service coordination but did not achieve the desired level of 'jointness' among the three services; and jointness remained elusive. In 2011-12, the Naresh Chandra Task Force was set up to review the progress of both the KRC and the GoM reports and clearly stated that the recommendations of both reports were only partially implemented. The task force recommended setting up additional structures, like the Special Operations Command and the Cyber Command. The Shekatkar Committee, in 2015-16, focused on organisational efficiency and optimisation of force structures to enhance joint capability development. In 2019, after many years of procrastination, the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) under the Ministry of Defence (MoD) was established and a post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was sanctioned and created.¹ China reorganised its Military Regions and created Theatre Commands (TC) in 2016. India's push for Theatre Commands started in 2019 and is still an ongoing process. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) declared the year 2025 as the 'Year of Reforms', where the reforms would focus on new domains such as cyber and space, and emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), Hypersonics, and Robotics.² The Press Information Bureau (PIB) release, amongst other issues, also mentioned that reforms were to be aimed at bolstering jointness and integration initiatives and facilitating the establishment of the Integrated Theatre Commands.³

Almost three decades of reforms have yielded no significant results, except for laying the foundation for future reforms. India's defence reforms over the decades, have been linear, incomplete and disjointed. What started in 1999 has not seen anything significant emerge, other than the setting up of the DMA (albeit with a flawed mandate) and the creation of the post of Chief

of the Defence Staff (CDS). The Allocation of Business (AoB) rules have remained archaic and out of sync.⁴ While incremental, these reforms have not kept pace with paradigm shifts in the conduct of modern warfare and the infusion of niche technologies. This article argues that, while reforms have occurred, they have unfortunately focused only on the armed forces and not on the apex level of strategy formulation. Ministries and Departments of the government continue to function in silos, with no convergence at all. The lack of strategic coherence has further complicated the issue, which is why structural and systemic reforms have languished for over two and a half decades.

Old Wine in a New Bottle

In an era characterised by contiguous frontlines, linear logistics movement, slow but sure decision cycles, a gradual transition from peace to war and clearly demarcated, separated domains, the erstwhile large, ambling structures made sense. In the intervening 26 years, warfare has totally transformed. The Russia-Ukraine War, the Israel-Hamas conflict, Operation Absolute Resolve, Operation Midnight Hammer and the USA's tariff warfare are testimony to the fact that large, domain-specific and sequential lines of operations are passé. In the Indian context, Theatre Commands should have been created two decades ago, when warfare and technology dictated them. Today, the situation is very different.

Modern warfare is no longer defined by just geography and territory. It has more to do with the convergence of timing, tempo and effects in multiple domains. The battlespace is not clearly demarcated; it is fused, ambiguous, multi-domain and fiercely contested. Victory is not necessarily reliant on occupation of territory. It stems from the enemy's structural and functional paralysis, leading to capitulation. Tomorrow's wars will not commence with the thunder of heavy artillery fire or the roar of fighter aircraft crossing the International Boundary (IB) and bombing military structures into oblivion. Instead, the war will be initiated by a college student sitting in a small room, wielding a laptop and collapsing the entire combat network of the adversary well before the first shot is fired. The war will commence with a silent cyber-attack on critical information infrastructure, crippling the decision-making cycle of the adversary. The war will address non-military targets to create functional paralysis, not of the armed forces, but of the entire nation and its war-making machinery. No fighter will cross the IB and no soldier will fire a bullet, but the war would have commenced at a pace faster than human comprehension.

The main problem with a theatre construct is the perennial fixation on two-dimensional maps. Modern and future wars would rarely be confined to a particular geography or a particular domain.

An airborne strike package could use space assets for communication, terrestrial assets for cyber intrusions, information operations for influencing political behaviour and unmanned kamikaze drones to accurately target strategic, operational and tactical leadership simultaneously. Operational success would not depend on where and how many forces are stationed. It would increasingly be dependent on how specialised capabilities are assembled, orbatted and applied at decisive points in multiple domains to disable the adversary's capability to react. During Operation Midnight Hammer, not one Iranian aircraft was able to get airborne during the US attack on three Iranian nuclear installations. On the other hand, the humongous loss to both Russian and Ukrainian troops and equipment in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is testimony to how fixation on a two-dimensional map would lead to large-scale attrition with no resolution in sight.

It would be utopian to think that service-specific silos would suddenly disappear in a Theatre Command construct. In fact, these silos would further get embedded in the emerging structures and severely affect operational effectiveness. Silos still exist in American Combatant Commands as well as Chinese Theatre Commands. The USA has already started downsizing its Combatant Commands.⁵ Plans are underway to merge the command and control of the US Central, European and African Commands under one US International Command and with renewed focus on continental safety, the US Northern and Central commands are to be realigned and placed under the US Americas Command.⁶ On similar lines, it would become a future imperative to get the entire Indian land mass under one coherent command because continental safety, in the Indian context would always remain relevant in India's security framework.

The very basis of creating three additional TCs from an already existing three-force structure appears to be *regression and not reform*. The future belongs to the ability to create disproportionate effects in multiple domains, and just like it's a tall task today, it will remain a tall task even with Theatre Commands. Therefore, to address emerging challenges, India needs to operationalise an Indian Concept of War Fighting, which fuses sound doctrine with dynamic leadership, joint planning with decentralised execution, modern technology with capability-driven acquisition programmes, mission-specific operational logistics with robust and redundant supply chains and adaptive Command and Control (C2) with a changed mindset to prosecute and win future wars.⁷

The Indian Dilemma

The Indian conundrum is peculiar not because of geography but because of the geopolitical situation. While geography mandates massed formations, massed formations alone will not

guarantee success. Theatre Commands should have been created two decades ago, when the demands of the situation and technological imperatives dictated them. Unfortunately, that ship had already sailed. But there's another one on the way, and India must catch it before bureaucracy and a false sense of security make India miss this one too. It is not about domain superiority but domain complementarity. The emerging model is fairly clear. While massed forces are required to hold ground and launch limited offensives, the entire Theatre Command construct cannot be trained and equipped to fight across multiple domains. Complementing permanent, geographically situated forces, there is a need to develop specialist, mission-oriented and operationally flexible forces to be applied at decisive points 'when and where' deemed appropriate. These formations must be properly trained and equipped for Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), with embedded capabilities in air, cyber, maritime, Electronic Warfare (EW), and precision strike. They would be tasked with specific operational purposes like dynamic air dominance, sea control and denial, cognitive warfare, and special disruptive operations deep inside the enemy territory. These formations would need to be lean, nimble, networked and doctrinally unified, trained to operate in a compressed decision framework with decentralised execution capability. Their power would lie not in fancy technology and the size of the formation, but in the convergence of timing, tempo and effects in multiple domains to cause rapid strategic paralysis. These Joint Task Forces (JTFs) could either be a reform of the existing Strike Corps or could be evolved from the concept of Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs), but not domain-specific. They must be a truly joint force being controlled at the apex level by a Joint Force Headquarters (JFHQ) which is not just another HQ IDS but a transformed and effective organisation capable of wielding Comprehensive National Power (CNP).⁸ Therefore, reforms in HDO should not be only for the armed forces. There should be a sweeping set of reforms designed to develop a 'whole of nation' approach focused on addressing the current and envisaged threat spectrum. Whether India geographically synchronises the regional commands of the three services or permanently shuts them down, the options are many; however the bottom line is that, in order to capitalise on tactical brilliance, India will need strategic coherence first, and that will only happen if India can plan centrally in a Joint Forces HQ.

Theatre Commands belong to an era characterised by linear, incremental and territorial warfare. Modern conflict demands something far more agile, mission-centric and capable of converting tactical actions into strategic effects. During Op *Sindoor*, no soldier crossed the IB, no ship entered the territorial waters of Pakistan, and no aircraft violated the 10 km line from the IB. Yet, those 88 hours yielded a decisive outcome. It all happened within the framework of the existing structure. What changed was the mindset and a 'whole of nation' approach. Cognitive superiority

and decision dominance are the cornerstones of how modern wars would be prosecuted, and thus, large HQs and Theatres may not be suitable for such operations. The decisive blow will be dealt by smaller, smarter and far more lethal multi-domain JTFs designed to win future wars. The structures that India forms now should be able to help navigate the next few decades. Therefore, what India builds today must be agile and effective to win conflicts that have not yet been imagined or comprehended. The institutions India builds today will ensure it does not stumble into the future, because the future will never be kind to inherited architectures.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies [CAPSS])

Notes:-

¹ VP Naik, "India's Higher Defence Reforms: Tactical Brilliance or Strategic Coherence," Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS), November 29, 2025, <https://capssindia.org/indias-higher-defence-reforms-tactical-brilliance-or-strategic-coherence/>. Accessed on February 11, 2026.

² Ministry of Defence, Press Information Bureau (PIB), "Ministry of Defence Declares 2025 as 'Year of Reforms'," January 01, 2025 <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2089184®=3&lang=2>. Accessed on February 11, 2026.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Naik, n.1.

⁵ Dan Lamothe, Tara Copp, Noah Robertson and Alex Horton, "Pentagon Plan Calls For Major Power Shifts Within US Military," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/12/15/military-command-plan-caine-hegseth/> Accessed on February 12, 2026.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Naik, n.1.

⁸ Ibid.