

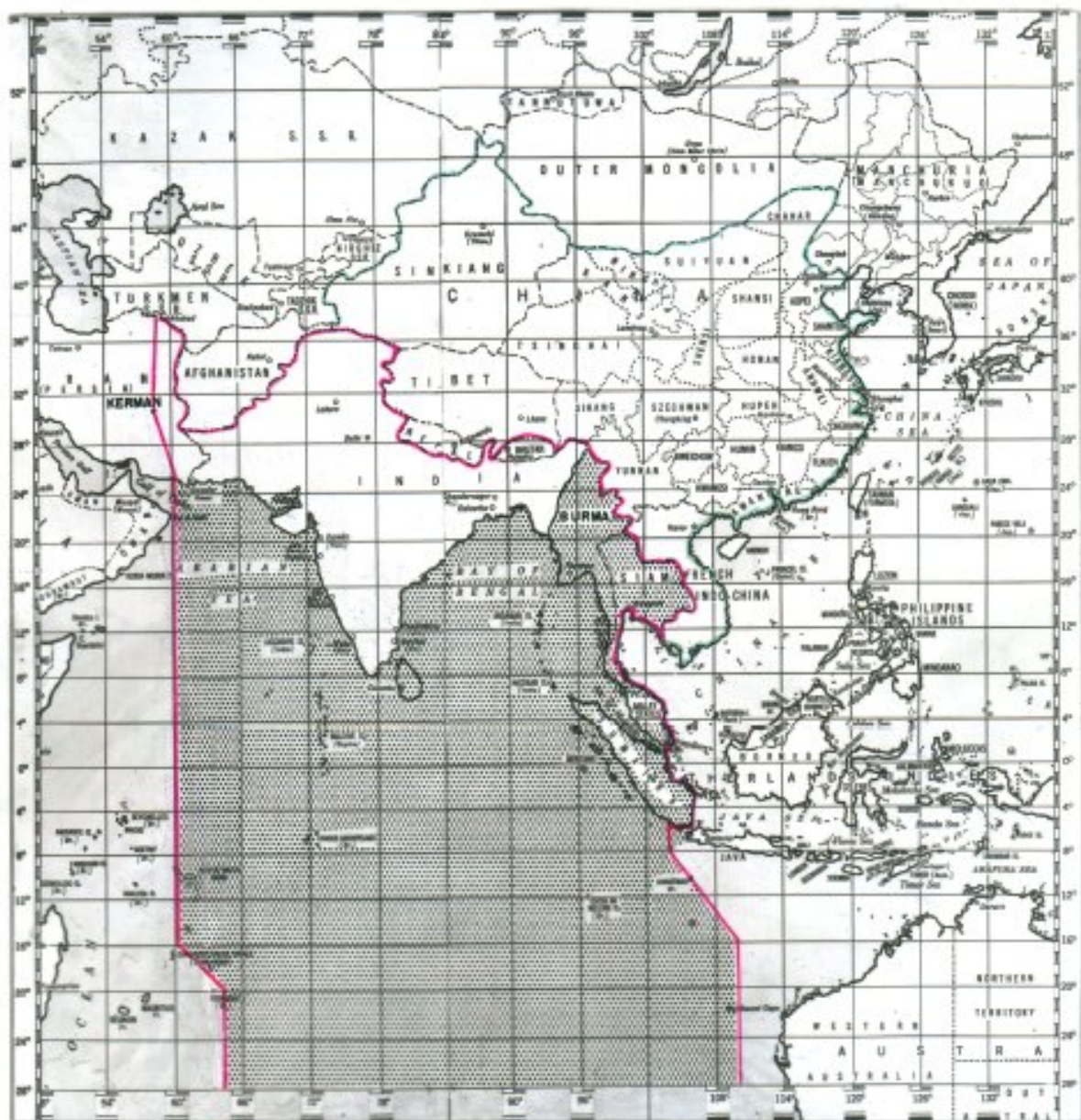


THEATRE COMMANDS FOR INDIA

An Academic Analysis

Gp Capt **VP Naik VM** & Wg Cdr **A Pichipoo Raja**

ONE NATION, ONE THEATRE



Source: US National Archives, China Burma India Theater Map 1943.

LEGEND

China Theater
Burma India Theater
SEAC



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Foreword

The character of war is undergoing a profound transformation. The diffusion of advanced technologies, compression of decision-making timelines, and the need for seamless integration of all war-fighting domains has rendered traditional, service-specific approaches to warfare increasingly inadequate. For a nation like India, confronted with a complex and evolving security environment marked by collusive threats, contested borders, and expanding maritime interests, the imperative for integrated warfighting is no longer aspirational; it is operationally urgent. These imperatives, therefore, spell out the urgent need for creating structures and organisations designed to fight and win tomorrow's wars. Towards this, India has embarked on a series of reforms primarily directed at joint and integrated application of combat power.

This publication emerges at a critical juncture in India's defence transformation journey. It brings together curated articles of two scholars from the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS) discussing the need for reforms and the possible way forward. The articles published here collectively offer both depth and diversity, ranging from doctrinal debates and command-and-control structures to operational art, technological enablers, and lessons from

contemporary conflicts. The essays in this volume do not seek to offer a singular, prescriptive model. Instead, they present a rigorous and often candid examination of competing perspectives. The collection brings out the nuances of carrying out such revolutionary reforms to enhance operational synergy, unity of command, and resource optimisation. It also cautions against precipitous reforms that may undermine established strengths, without adequate doctrinal clarity, technological integration, and joint training frameworks. This dialectic is not a weakness; rather, it is a reflection of a mature professional military discourse grappling with complex change.

One such reform being widely debated is the creation of Theatre Commands in India. At the heart of the Theatre Commands discourse lies a central tension: how to reconcile the distinct operational philosophies and core competencies of individual services with the demands of unified, theatre-level warfighting. Nowhere is this tension more pronounced than in the domain of air power. By its very nature, air power is inherently flexible, centrally controlled, and strategically oriented. Its optimal employment often transcends geographic boundaries, enabling effects across multiple theatres and domains simultaneously. The transition to Theatre Commands, therefore, raises critical questions regarding the preservation of air power's doctrinal tenets, the risks of fragmentation, and the mechanisms required to ensure its effective integration without dilution.

Importantly, the compilation situates the Indian debate within a broader global context. Experiences of major military powers that have adopted various forms of theatre commands, each shaped by

their unique strategic cultures, threat perceptions, and institutional histories, offer valuable insights, but not templates. India's pathway must remain uniquely Indian, informed by its geography, culture, political objectives, and operational realities.

As India advances towards a more integrated force structure, the role of informed debate assumes paramount importance. Think tanks such as CAPSS play a vital role in this ecosystem by providing platforms for critical analysis, fostering intellectual rigour, and bridging the gap between policy, doctrine, and operational practice. This volume is a testament to that contribution.

It is hoped that this compilation will serve not only as a reference for policymakers, military professionals, and scholars, but also as a catalyst for continued dialogue. The journey towards organisational and functional reforms needs to be both complex as well as iterative. By engaging with diverse viewpoints and grounding reform in thoughtful analysis, India can ensure that its transition enhances not just jointness, but warfighting effectiveness in its truest sense.

Air Vice Marshal **Anil Golani** (Retd)

Director General

Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies

Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands – To Be or Not to Be?

VP NAIK

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.

It would be interesting to understand why certain countries have created Theatre Commands. The United States of America created

Gp Capt VP Naik VM, is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Air Force Studies, New Delhi.

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 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 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.”⁹ As 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.

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 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?

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 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.

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Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands–Redux

VP NAIK

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.

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Air Power Musings India's Higher Defence Reforms: Tactical Brilliance or Strategic Coherence

VP NAIK

Introduction

Reforms in the Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) of India have been an ongoing process for many years, yet nothing substantial has come its way. 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. The CDS was to serve as the single-point adviser to the Government of India (GoI) on all military matters. While revolutionary, these reforms have not quite reaped the benefits that should have accrued with such path-breaking changes. Both these steps are welcome measures and are in the right direction; however, India's Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) continues to run in independent silos without any significant cross-domain

interaction. These reforms have not brought about any meaningful measures to enhance integration of the armed forces; civil-military relations have not quite improved, and jointness in war fighting has still not materialised. These inadequacies have arisen primarily due to ambiguity in the laid-down charter, leading to structural paralysis.

The Allocation of Business (AoB) Rules of MoD spell out the charter for both the Department of Defence (DoD), headed by the Defence Secretary and the DMA, headed by the CDS. A closer look at the charter reveals several interesting observations. The first rule in the DoD charter is, “*Defence of India and every part thereof including defence policy and preparation for defence and all such acts as may be conducive in times of war to its prosecution and after its termination to effective demobilisation.*”¹ The DoD is responsible for the entire gamut of military operations, starting from mobilisation, to the conduct of operations, followed by demobilisation. *The DoD is also responsible for all matters concerning defence policy, preparation for defence, Research and Development (R&D), and all capital procurement.* The moot question that arises is, “*Why was the DMA created when everything pertaining to India’s defence was to be handled by DoD?*” The Allocation of Business Rules pertaining to DMA appears to be more like ‘*Terms of Reference*’ for a ‘*Board of Officers*’ rather than articulating responsibilities for the defence of the nation.² One cannot help but think that the DMA was created in haste, without giving much thought to the actual charter and how the DMA (as part of MoD) should have been the department entrusted with the defence of India

and all substantial matters pertaining to operations. Further scrutiny of the AoB rules also brings out the fact that the setting up of Theatre Commands, in quick time, appeared to be one of the main aims and mandates of DMA.

The aim of this paper is to elucidate the problem statement, examine India's defence priorities and recommend a possible HDO structure to plan and fight future wars.

Harnessing Artificial Intelligence: What is Wrong with the Way the Indian Armed Forces Fight?

There are many papers and scholarly articles on jointmanship, the need for integrated application of combat power, Multi-domain Operations (MDO), a 'whole of nation' approach towards national security and transformation of the Indian Armed Forces. Having gone through a substantial number of such writings, when dealing with the modernisation of the Indian Armed Forces (IAF), it was felt that Artificial Intelligence (AI) should also have a say to identify problem areas, bring out key criticisms of the Indian Armed Forces' approach to combat and find out what was wrong with the way the Indian Armed Forces fought? Two independent questions were posed to AI chatbots, Grok and ChatGPT. The question presented to Grok was '*Identify key criticisms of the Indian Armed Forces' approach to combat*' and ChatGPT was asked '*What is wrong with the way the Indian Armed Forces fight?*' The AI-generated responses (bulleted) have been collated below to provide additional inputs when arriving at the all-important 'problem statement'.

Grok processed the inputs and brought out the following problem areas, drawing on expert assessment and historical analyses:

(a) Outdated and Rigid Doctrine Skewed Towards Large-Scale Conventional Offensives.

- (i) Emphasis on massive, autonomous ground formations for deep incursions and territorial gains to impose post-war leverage.
- (ii) Orthodox approach, ill-suited for modern wars.
- (iii) Calls for support by other arms if and when considered necessary.
- (iv) Unwieldy and large formations attempting high-speed manoeuvre warfare in obstacle-ridden terrain.
- (v) Tactics prioritising mass mobilisation and firepower over precision and agility, leaving the forces vulnerable.

(b) Chronic Lack of Jointness and Inter-Service Coordination.

- (i) Services operating in silos due to historical rivalries and a lack of a unified command structure at the apex level.
- (ii) Disjointed responses highlighted during recent conflicts like Balakot operations, Galwan clash, Doklam imbroglio and Eastern Ladakh contingency.
- (iii) Lack of a common Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) grid encompassing both the HDO set-up as well as the fighting forces.
- (iv) Resort to static infantry heavy defences against drones, Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) and hybrid threats.

- (v) Political micro-management and bureaucratic inertia risking irrelevance against agile forces.
- (c) Intelligence and Surveillance Failures.**
 - (i) Repeated lapses in human and electronic intelligence, allowing surprise incursions like Kargil and Galwan.
 - (ii) Without adequate early warning and battlefield transparency, troops end up fighting reactively rather than adopting a pro-active strategy.
- (d) Equipment Shortages, Outdated Arsenal and Procurement Inefficiencies.**
 - (i) A bloated manpower focus starves modernisation, resulting in reduced ammunition stockpiles, obsolete equipment and platforms and chronic delays in induction of modern equipment.
 - (ii) Forces compensate for quality by quantity, leading to high attrition tactics being adopted, which is unsuitable for modern conflicts. The Navy and Air Force severely lag in capability and technological upgrades.
- (e) Limited High-Intensity Combat Experience and Training Gaps.**
 - (i) No major wars since 1971, experience skewed towards Counter Insurgency (COIN) operations.
 - (ii) Doctrinal Mismatch and emphasis on defensive holding over fluid manoeuvres.
 - (iii) Fostering a 'promotion over performance' culture, making the organisation resistant to innovation.

ChatGPT looked at it from another angle by analysing how the Indian Armed Forces fought wars (operational art, doctrines and command structures) vis-à-vis how they were prepared to fight (institutional structures, procurement mechanisms and integration of the three services) to arrive at a candid assessment often echoed by military thinkers, veterans and strategic scholars:

(a) Fragmented Warfighting and Lack of Jointness.

- (i) Siloed planning and conduct of operations by the three services leading to fragmented warfighting.
- (ii) Joint targeting and ISR integration are severely lacking.

(b) Doctrine-Technology Gap.

- (i) Reactive doctrines, especially for land warfare, leading to large-scale attrition.
- (ii) Limited infusion and exploitation of technology in the actual conduct of operations.
- (iii) Very little focus on enabling technology.

(c) Centralised Decision Making and Lack of Flexibility.

- (i) Culture of close control by senior leadership resulting in a lack of latitude for junior commanders.
- (ii) Minimal decision-making at the junior leadership level affecting flexibility in the tactical environment.
- (iii) Both close control and lack of latitude to junior leadership resulting in slower tempo, reduced initiative, and difficulty in adapting to fluid battlefield dynamics, especially in hybrid or grey-zone scenarios.

(d) Overemphasis on Manpower, Underemphasis on Capability.

- (i) Land Power-centric mindset rendering naval and air assets as support providers rather than independent sources of firepower.
 - (ii) Neglect of air and naval modernisation is crucial for strategic deterrence and power projection.
- (e) Bureaucratic and Procurement Bottlenecks.**
- (i) Civil-Military divide in MoD, with service headquarters having limited autonomy in procurement and planning.
 - (ii) Delayed modernisation and capability enhancement.
 - (iii) Lack of accountability of the Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs) leading to lethargic indigenisation, delayed R&D, deferred manufacturing and wastage of precious funds.
- (f) Weak Integration of Strategy, Policy and Operations.**
- (i) No clarity on 'Theory of Victory'. No articulation of how military means achieve political ends. This leads to wars being fought for limited tactical gains without strategic clarity.
 - (iii) Civil-Military disconnect wherein political leadership does not involve military leadership for advice on integrated national security frameworks combining diplomacy, economy and defence.
- (g) Training and Simulation Deficits.**
- (i) Limited realism in training with more emphasis on drills rather than realistic combat simulation and joint exercises in multi-domain warfare environments.

- (ii) Very few large-scale tri-services war games simulating high-intensity combat against a peer adversary in a multi-domain setting.

(h) Adaptation to the Changing Character of War.

- (i) Slow in the information domain: China's concept of intelligentised warfare, combining AI, cyber, EW, and space, has no equivalent Indian concept.
- (ii) India's response to low-intensity conflicts is reactive rather than pro-active or pre-emptive.
- (iii) Severe shortage of 'informatisation' within the armed forces, especially the Army, affecting flexibility at the tactical level.
- (iv) Lack of technological expertise for hybrid and grey zone situations.

(i) Limited Learning Culture.

- (i) Indian armed forces have a weak after-action analysis ethos. There is a lack of an open culture of institutional introspection and bringing out doctrinal lessons.
- (ii) Western militaries conduct extensive after-action reviews and bring out strategic, operational and tactical lessons. The Indian system tends to keep failures under wraps by giving high security classifications, thereby preventing effective scrutiny and analysis.

ChatGPT further added that the '*Indian armed forces do not fight badly, they fight bravely, but neither jointly, efficiently or strategically.*

Their character of fighting is professional but their system of fighting is structurally inefficient. The challenge therefore is not courage or competence; it is integration and innovation with strategic clarity.'

Key Takeaways

Artificial Intelligence has provided certain inputs that resonate with inputs from scholarly articles, newspaper reports and academic discourse in various seminars and for national defence. Certain significant issues and associated inferences from them are being collated below for ease of comprehension: -

- (a) Outdated and rigid doctrines skewed towards large-scale conventional action.
 - (i) Strategy prioritising mass mobilisation and conventional war fighting.
 - (ii) More stress on individual service capability and less on integration.
 - (iii) Infantry heavy defences are ineffective against drones, PGMs and swarms.
 - (iv) Fragmented war fighting.
- (b) Chronic lack of integration and operations in silos.
 - (i) Inter-service rivalries.
 - (ii) Lack of unified command and control structures.
- (c) Repeated failures of intelligence and surveillance, creating large gaps in battlefield awareness.
- (d) High attrition tactics focusing on mass rather than a healthy mix of technology and mass.

- (e) Limited combat experience in modern conventional operations. Significant focus on Counter Insurgency (CI) and Counter Terrorism (CT) operations.
- (f) Equipment shortages, outdated arsenal and procurement inefficiencies.
- (g) Weak integration of strategy, policy and operations with a focus on limited tactical gains without strategic coherence.
 - (i) Very high bureaucratic inertia.
 - (ii) A missing whole-of-nation approach to war fighting.
- (h) Reactive strategy primarily responding to situations rather than preempting/anticipating developments due to limited battlefield transparency and situational awareness.
- (j) Over-emphasis on manpower and under-emphasis on capability.
- (k) More stress on ownership of assets and less stress on collective war-fighting capability.
- (l) Doctrine-technology gap. The vision exists, but capability development lags far behind.
- (m) Lack of common communication protocols further promoting operations in silos.
- (n) Limited learning culture with very little after-action review.

The points listed above are just a few pointers and by no means exhaustive; however, they do bring out certain inadequacies and deficiencies that need to be addressed. These issues, though deliberated in various defence forums, do not gain the necessary traction at the apex level and thus remain unaddressed. Capability development

plans lack the required budgetary support, and in India's quest for self-reliance, many times, existing capability gaps go unnoticed and ignored.

Continental and Maritime Powers

Before discussing the problem statement, it would be interesting to understand where the dominant threat to India would emerge from. Between the end of the Civil War in the USA and the Spanish-American War of 1898, the American economy quietly chugged along with high annual growth rates.³ Consequently, as America traded more with the outside world, it developed, for the first time, complex economic and strategic interests in far-flung places that led to, among military actions, Navy and Marine landings in South America and the Pacific.⁴ Another factor that allowed America to focus outwards was its consolidation and stabilisation of internal issues. As a result, the USA embarked on the development of a large Navy along with a Marine Force to project power far away from its shores. Over the next century, the USA became a dominant maritime power, able to traverse the world's oceans and dominate from the seas. An interesting supposition is that the continental USA faced no external threats for over two centuries, allowing the USA to develop its Navy and exercise military might all across the world. Post World War II and during the Cold War, Russia emerged as a threat to American hegemony and also posed an existential threat to the continental USA through long-range bombers and ballistic missiles. After the disintegration of the USSR, the USA again became the

sole super-power and continued its forays across the world, especially in West Asia and Western Pacific regions, including the South China Sea. The US Navy became stronger with the advent of supercarriers and nuclear submarines. American strategic interests continue to lie far from its own shores, physically isolating the country from any threat, Black Swan events like 9/11 being more of an exception rather than a norm. Therefore, it would be appropriate to tag the USA as a dominant maritime power with global aspirations.

China, on the other hand, has primarily been a Continental Power with regional aspirations. Having consolidated its land borders (barring a few), it has now begun to focus outwards. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is the largest standing Army in the world, while the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) are still slowly expanding their strength and capability. Having dominated the region on land, what drives China beyond its official borders is its core national interest, economic survival and growth.⁵ China has also begun expanding its presence across the world in search of oil, minerals and proximity to Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) to safeguard its energy needs. China is also blessed with an extensive coastline and is the largest littoral nation on the Western Pacific Coast. The East and South China Seas are China's backyard and the USA's playground. Herein lies the contest where we can see Chinese land power pitted against American sea power, with Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula as the main focal points.⁶

Therefore, we see Chinese strategies such as Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD) being played out to safeguard continental

China and also prevent incursions by the USA into the First Island Chain. For decades, China was preoccupied with land, where America, particularly since its misadventure in Vietnam, has no appetite to go. America, even today, has no such appetite in Asia, especially after its ordeals in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁷ China is in the early stages of transforming from a predominantly continental power to an aspiring maritime power, and that is the biggest change occurring in the Asia-Pacific region.

From the preceding paragraphs, it is clear that the USA is a dominant Maritime Power with global aspirations, and China remains a dominant Continental Power with maritime ambitions. Where does that leave India? Is India a continental power or a maritime power? Such questions are better answered after seeing how geography plays a significant role in determining India's priorities.

The Stopping Power of Water and India's Options

John J. Mearsheimer, in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, speaks of the stopping power of water and how it serves as an effective barrier. He further adds that, "When great powers are separated by large bodies of water, they usually do not have much offensive capability against each other, regardless of the relative size of their armies. Large bodies of water are formidable obstacles that pose significant power projection problems for attacking armies. For example, the stopping power of water helps to explain why the United States has never been invaded by another great power. It also explains why the USA has never tried to conquer territory in Europe

or North East Asia. Great powers located on the same land mass are in a much better position to attack and conquer each other. That is especially true of states that share a common border. Therefore, great powers separated by water are likely to fear each other less than great powers that can get at each other over land.”⁸ One may say that the Britishers and other colonial forces came from the seas and occupied India; true as it is, the fact that India in those times was not united but rather fragmented under various rulers and kingdoms, making it vulnerable to external influence and subjugation. Today’s India is a far cry from that, unified and centrally controlled.

What emerges is an interesting fact that Indian policymakers may wish to dwell on further. The geography of India is such that the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal give India the inherent safety provided by the stopping power of water and also give valuable access to some of the most important SLOCs in the world. The seas and oceans not only provide dividends and bounty but also protect the Indian subcontinent from external aggression. However, juxtaposing what Mearsheimer said, the larger threat emerges from the continental borders to India’s west and north. Traditionally, India has been a continental power and has developed capabilities and capacities to safeguard itself against land-based external aggression. Therefore, the predominant threat to India continues to be from Pakistan and China in the continental battlespace. China’s growing naval power is primarily aimed at countering the USA in the South China Sea and at safeguarding its maritime trade and energy supplies. Similarly, while it needs to maintain strong and capable forces to

thwart threats emanating from the land borders, it must also develop a credible naval capability to be able to project military power from the maritime domain to affect the battle on land significantly. As an adjunct to this theory, India must develop both the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands to serve as credible military outposts and first lines of defence against any threat emanating from the maritime domain. *However, it is important to note that the main threat to Indian sovereignty will continue to be from the continental domain, and the armed forces of India need to be prepared, equipped and trained for fighting in this domain as a primary front. Growth and capability enhancement of the Navy must continue, but definitely not at the cost of the land and air forces.*

The Problem Statement

There are multiple issues that need to be addressed when it comes to the Indian Armed Forces and their fighting methods. Op *Sindoor* has provided India with an opportunity to introspect and arrive at tangible solutions. There is a lot of banter going on about how many aircraft India shot down and how many Pakistan shot down. Modern warfare is not just about targeting individual aircraft, tanks and ships; it is about crippling the war machinery of the adversary, which in today's parlance amounts to targeting and destroying C2 nodes and communication centres to achieve information and decision dominance. One must be able to affect the adversary's Observe, Orient, Decide and Act (OODA) loop to gain the upper hand. Unlike yesteryears, in a highly connected and networked battlespace,

decision-making takes place further and further away from the actual battle. The inherent safety that distance from the battlefield provided earlier is no longer available today. Modern weapons permit precision targeting from large distances, and leadership can be threatened from the word go. The aim is to destroy the enemy's will and ability to fight. It is the ability to cripple the enemy's war-waging potential that will prove to be decisive, and aircraft, tanks and ships are the means to get to the ends, not an end by themselves. Without going into the bean count, suffices to say, Pakistan was forced to stop kinetic action in just four days because India managed to target important communication nodes and affect their C2 capability. Additionally, targeting runways like Sargodha and Chaklala and destroying early warning radars sent a clear message to the Pakistan leadership of possible repercussions, directly affecting their will to fight. Some key takeaways from Op *Sindoor* are as follows:

- (a) A *whole-of-nation* approach to war fighting is essential. The entire weight of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) must be brought to bear on an adversary for decisive victory.
- (b) Centralised planning, distributed control and decentralised execution.
- (c) Need for a joint planning establishment at the apex level.
- (d) Need for integrated application of combat power, without worrying about ownership of assets.
- (e) Importance of networking air defence assets for ensuring a comprehensive and coherent response.

- (f) Future wars may not necessarily be long drawn out like what is being seen between Russia and Ukraine. They could also be very short, swift and intense, giving very little time for conventional response mechanisms to activate. Wars could be over well before the completion of mobilisation by conventional land forces.
- (g) Primary threat to Indian sovereignty will continue to be continental, and therefore India needs to be prepared for the same.
- (h) Air Power as an instrument of choice proved to be decisive. India cannot afford to let its air power capability diminish. While indigenous programmes need impetus and support, the war-waging capability of the country cannot be held to ransom for want of indigenous products. It is not about acquiring 42 squadrons or three aircraft carriers. It is about retaining an edge over India's adversaries because, as of now, with respect to Pakistan, that gap is rapidly reducing.
- (j) Modern technologies like AI, drones, Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (CUAS), and smart Air Defence philosophy need to be invested in to retain effectiveness.
- (k) Modern combat is all about systems and '*system of systems*'. Networking and 'informatisation' are key enablers and must become a priority for all planners. *Akashteer* of the Army, *Trigun* of the Navy and the *Integrated Air Command and Control System* (IACCS) of the Air Force need to have a handshake at appropriate levels to ensure decision dominance.
- (l) Importance of operational logistics, robust and secure supply chains cannot be over-emphasised.

- (m) Hybrid wars and multi-domain operations (MDO) are the way forward, and capability development plans must factor these requirements.
- (n) Large unwieldy force structures need to be replaced with agile, networked and adaptive force structures. There is a need to remove silos and create structures more suitable for fighting in multiple domains.
- (o) Information warfare and the battle of narratives are as important as kinetic action and must be embedded as part of the overall strategy.
- (p) One must develop technology and weapons to target an adversary's critical infrastructure while simultaneously ensuring the protection of one's own critical infrastructure.
- (q) The adversary will not always respond in the way it has previously done. There will never be any precedence to template own plans. This calls for agile forces, effective ISR, swift decision making and most importantly, a changed mindset.
- (r) The importance of long-range, precision stand-off weapons cannot be ignored. The ability to hit the enemy well inside his territory with precision can win wars.
- (s) While the West may have done away with concepts like Effects-Based Operations (EBO) and Centre of Gravity (CoG) targeting, in the Indian context, their relevance will always remain.
- (t) To be able to deliver decisive firepower in a short time is the *raison-de-etre* of contemporary forces. *See first and see the farthest*;

reach first and reach the fastest; hit first and hit the hardest will continue to be the ‘mantra’ of success.

Op *Sindoor* showed that the Indian Armed Forces have the capability to demonstrate tactical brilliance and arrive at strategic coherence. This was not the case in previous wars and conflicts, where tactical brilliance often outshone strategic coherence. For once, India demonstrated a whole-of-nation approach to war fighting, and it worked! Silos were forgotten, planning was undertaken jointly, and the three Service Chiefs were given a clear mandate with adequate freedom to prosecute the war. Clarity in the political aim and a well-articulated Conflict Termination Criteria (CTC) made things easier for the armed forces. In a nutshell, the problem is not joint fighting; it is joint planning. If joint planning is done meticulously, the Indian armed forces have the capability and wherewithal to prosecute modern wars.

Another problem that emerges is the ‘informatisation’ of the armed forces. In modern wars, adequate ‘informatisation’ at the tactical and operational level is a pre-requisite. The air and ground situation in modern wars is very fluid, and there will be situations when tactical and operational commanders will have to undertake time-sensitive targeting to gain immediate advantage and waiting for a decision from higher headquarters may be too late. Therefore, there is a need to create specialised, agile, adaptive and all-arms forces to deliver when and where it counts. The Indian borders continue to be hostile and hot. Post Op *Sindoor*, India has drawn its red lines,

which, if crossed or transgressed, would lead to punitive action by India. Therefore, India does not have the luxury of going through the long-drawn process of force restructuring while still retaining the capability to respond to threats and win wars. In such a situation, force reconfiguration becomes a viable option.⁹

The problem statement, therefore, needs to take into account the need for joint planning at the apex level, a whole-of-nation approach to war fighting, force reconfiguration rather than restructuring and most importantly, integrated application of combat power.¹⁰ Interestingly, none of these issues classically requires the setting up of Theatre Commands.

Having examined inputs from AI, considering the nuances of geography and blending them with political constraints and looking at the likely threats to Indian sovereignty, a suggested problem statement is as follows. *“In the future, the Indian Armed Forces will be faced with high-intensity, hybrid and multi-domain threats in the region. There is a need 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 C2 with a changed mindset to prosecute and win future wars.”*

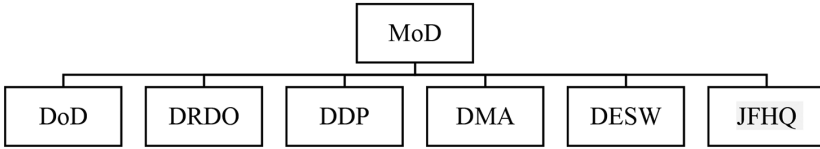
Recommended Structures at the Apex Level

Success in combat largely depends on sound leadership, adaptive decision-making and effective C2. In the Indian context, most

problems have emanated not at the tactical or operational level but at the apex level. As Clausewitz famously said, war is a continuation of politics by other means; therefore, in order to align military strategy with national objectives, the armed forces must be part of the national decision-making process. Strategic guidance cannot be over-emphasised, and therefore, there is a need for the creation of joint apex structures in India's Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) to bring about tactical and operational coherence. For force reconfiguration, it would be prudent to have a 'top-down' approach rather than a 'bottom-up' approach. India's service-specific planning structures are a relic of the industrial age. In the information age, unity of effort, speed and interoperability will determine success or failure.

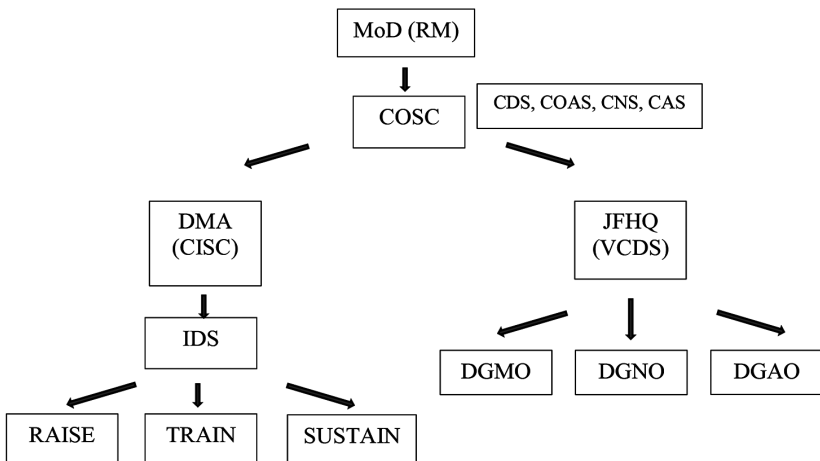
At the apex level, under the MoD, a new vertical, the Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ), is needed for joint planning. For a 'whole-of-nation' approach to warfighting, all essential functionaries of relevant ministries and organisations must have representatives in the JFHQ. To ensure the JFHQ is sufficiently armed, it is proposed that representatives from various ministries and organisations be at the level of Additional Secretaries (AS), with essential staff placed under them. It is important to create a fresh mandate for DoD, DMA and the proposed JFHQ, clearly allocating responsibilities, roles and tasks without ambiguity. While the DoD would continue to operate under the Defence Minister, the DMA and the JFHQ are recommended to be placed under the COSC to have coherence between RTS functions and war fighting.

Fig 1



For a ‘whole-of-nation’ approach, there is a need for the CDS and three Service Chiefs to be a permanent part of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) and not on an invitational basis. The CDS and the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) must continue to remain the single point of advice on defence matters to the Defence Minister. For Comprehensive National Power (CNP) to be exercised, representatives from all elements must form a part of CCS.

Fig 2

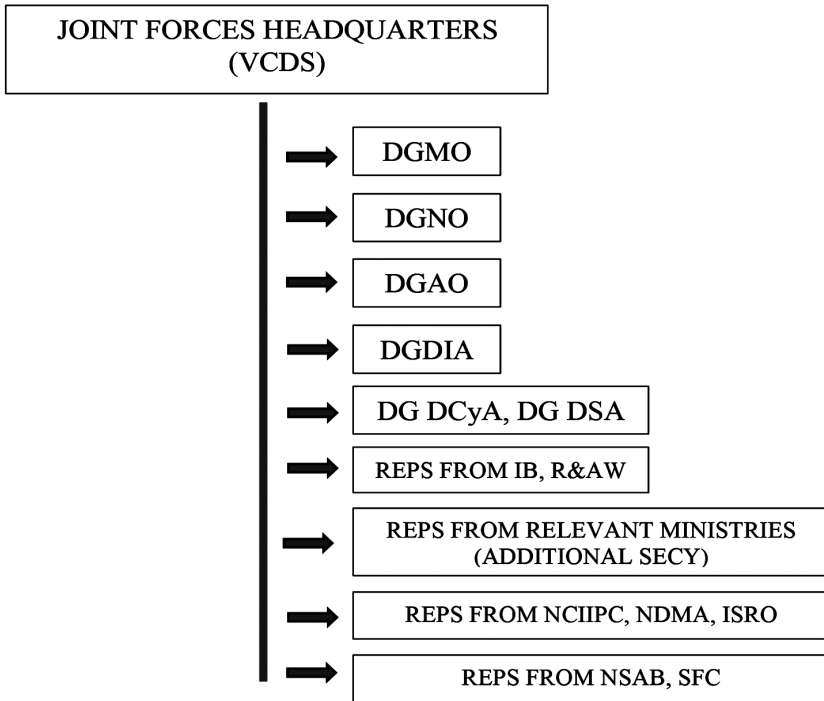


It is recommended that the COSC have two verticals placed under it. The first would be the Department of Military Affairs (DMA),

recommended to be headed by the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff and Secretary to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC). It is recommended that the present system of dual-hatting by the CDS as Chairman COSC and Secretary DMA be discontinued to ensure equivalence in protocol with other Secretaries in various ministries. Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) would continue to be placed under the CISC. The current role of IDS includes managing policy, doctrine and procurement, facilitating joint training with special focus on modernising defence by integrating emerging technologies which would further be divided into three verticals, namely Raise. Train and Sustain (RTS). As Secretary to COSC, the CISC would have the essential know-how on all operational plans and contingencies, based on which tri-service functions of RTS would be undertaken.

The other vertical under COSC is proposed to be the Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ) for apex-level planning of operations. The existing dichotomy of responsibility for war fighting must be addressed on priority. The DoD's mandate for warfighting must be withdrawn and handed over to the COSC and the JFHQ.¹¹ The JFHQ must have representatives from all elements concerned with military operations, including those from relevant ministries and organisations involved in national security. It would be prudent to have representation from the National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC), the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) as part of the JFHQ for the conduct of hybrid and multi-domain operations.

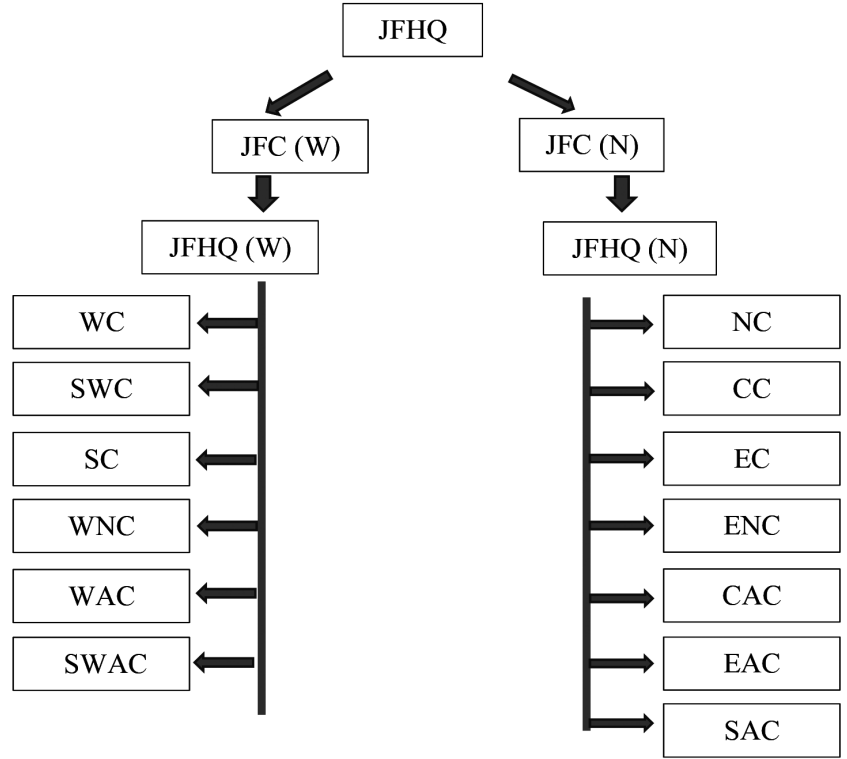
Fig 3



The Indian Army has seven regional Commands; the Navy has three, and the Air Force has seven. A total of 17 Commands, spread across the entire country, handle various contingencies and safeguard the territorial integrity of India. Joint planning organisations will need to be created not only at the apex level but also at the level of Command HQs. For effective C2, it is proposed that India be divided into two threat zones/fronts, i.e., Western Front (threat from Pakistan) and Northern Front (threat from China) and be named Joint Forces Command (West) and Joint Forces Command (North), respectively. It is also proposed that for retaining unity of

command, a Regional JFHQ be created in each of the two threat zones [JFHQ(W) and JFHQ(N)], headed by a three-star officer. Below the Regional JFHQs, two options are possible: either merge all relevant regional commands or let the regional commands remain. The main aim is to synergise operations at the combatant command level to ensure strategic and operational coherence.

Fig 4



In both the regional JFHQs, there is a need for representation from all elements involved in MDO, including the cyber and space

domains. The focus of the regional JFHQ would primarily be warfighting. The process of modernisation of the armed forces is a slow and long-drawn process, and it may not be practically possible to make all elements of the armed forces fully ‘intelligentised and informatised’. Therefore, it is essential to create specialised battle groups which are fully modernised and trained for MDO. The Indian Army has been in the process of creating Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) for some time now. Rather than a service-specific battle group, it is recommended to create Joint Task Forces (JTFs) on the lines of the IBGs, consisting of all arms and services, to ensure effective application of combat power. The JTFs created could be specialised battle groups equipped and trained for specific tasks and roles. They could be either terrain-specific or role-specific. But it is essential that they are highly ‘informatised’ and consist of all three services (wherever applicable). The main task of JTFs would be to synergistically undertake multi-domain operations in an ‘*intelligentised* and *informatised*’ environment and act as force multipliers, augmenting the rest of the conventional forces.

The Training Commands of the three services [Army Training Command (ARTRAC) of the Army, Southern Naval Command (SNC) of the Navy and Training Command (TC) of the IAF] are recommended to be placed under HQ IDS as part of the RTS effort and ensure joint training for the armed forces, optimising resources and training effort. The role of the Maintenance Command of the IAF could be merged with the role of the Air Officer-in-charge

Maintenance (AOM) branch at the level of the Air HQ, with parallel representation at the regional JFHQs.

Parting Shots

The Indian Armed Forces have demonstrated brilliant tactical acumen in every war India has fought since independence. As first responders, the armed forces of India have also distinguished themselves during Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations within India and around the world. Their professional acumen, patriotism, perseverance and courage are, without doubt, of a very high order, and the armed forces are looked up to by all Indians. However, tactical and operational brilliance must be backed up by strategic coherence, and this is where gaping voids have emerged. From Kargil to Galwan and from Uri to Balakot, there have been instances of intelligence failures, a lack of understanding of operational philosophies of other services, and inter-service turf wars that have affected the conduct of operations. This paper has adopted a blended approach by amalgamating various scholarly articles with AI inputs to arrive at a problem statement to address key issues that impact the effective employment of the armed forces.

The geo-political situation in India is quite different from what we can see across the world, and therefore, lessons from current conflicts cannot be directly implemented in the Indian context. Force reconfiguration or restructuring cannot be templated from other countries, nor can reforms be directly replicated. Concepts and ideas

from across the world must be studied in detail, but what is essential is that India develops a nuanced, well-thought-out Indian Concept of War Fighting. The absence of a suitable joint planning mechanism at the apex level has emerged as a major lacuna in the Indian context and must be addressed as a priority. *Op Sindoor* has given a glimpse of what India is capable of when an optimal process for the employment of CNP is undertaken. Clarity of political objective, well laid down rules of engagement, operational freedom and clear conflict termination criteria make employment of the armed forces more coherent and in-sync with the political aim. The starting point for this to happen is the setting up of an apex joint planning organisation comprising all elements of CNP. Other issues like service-specific silos, procurement inadequacies, civil-military divide, lack of clear political directions and most importantly, integrated application of combat power will all fall into place.

Another major issue identified in this paper is the limited learning culture prevailing in India. India must develop an open culture of institutional introspection by conducting extensive after-action reviews. These reviews must be conveyed to all concerned to ensure mistakes made earlier are not repeated, and gaps/voids are suitably plugged. There is a great deal of talk about reducing the strength of the armed forces, primarily focused on being able to cut down on the revenue budget. In the Indian context, it must be understood that mass has its own inherent advantages. Against both Pakistan and China, mass has a very important role to play, and the same needs to be respected. Even in the Russia-Ukraine war, along with

modern technology, mass has played a crucial role. While technology offers tremendous advantages, it cannot completely replace mass, and attempts to do so may jeopardise both offensive as well as defensive capabilities. India must endeavour to balance quality with quantity to arrive at optimal force structures without compromising either.

The way India's Armed Forces fight is a product of history, institutional customs and traditions, and a strategic culture deeply rooted in India's colonial past. There is a need to take a leaf out of our pre-colonial past to revive India's original strategic culture and thinking. India has always prioritised territorial defence over developing an ability to project power, which has resulted in outdated structures, organisations and doctrines. India needs to shed these inadequacies and transition from attrition warfare to warfare that is agile, multi-domain, adaptive and most importantly, joint, so that military potential can be converted into decisive strategic outcomes.

(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])

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>) and *Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands Redux* (Published on CAPSS website, In Focus, <https://capssindia.org/>

air-power-musings-theatre-commands-redux/) brought out certain issues that need to be addressed before embarking on key reforms directed at war fighting.

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Air Power Musings When Structure Lags Strategy: The Theatre Command Fallacy

VP NAIK

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])

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Air Power Musings One Nation, One Theatre, and One Plan

VP Naik

We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose.

We stand together until the end.

In continuation of a series of articles on Higher Defence reforms, this article sheds light on the need for India-specific structures for modern war fighting. The first article was about whether Theatre Commands were required or not. *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>). The second article primarily explained the differences between Theatres and fronts and brought out the employment philosophy of the India Air Force. *Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands Redux* (Published on CAPSS website, In Focus, <https://capssindia.org/air-power-musings-theatre-commands-redux/>). The third article carried out a joint AI and human analysis of the need for reforms and what was wrong with the way India plans to fight, and articulated a problem statement. The

fourth article recommended possible structures for the reforms and brought out certain lacunae at the apex level. 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. The fifth article brought out certain facts about modern war fighting and how the theatre construct was already an old concept. Air Power Musings: When Structure Lags Strategy, The Theatre Command Fallacy, <https://capssindia.org/air-power-musings-when-structure-lags-strategy-the-theatre-command-fallacy>. The aim of the series was to build a coherent argument towards higher defence reforms in India and bring out possible actionable options in the national security construct.

Introduction

India's unique geostrategic problem of having two contiguous adversaries, who may act simultaneously, makes the threat manifest as a *single entity* on multiple fronts. The emerging geopolitical landscape in Myanmar and Bangladesh also merits strategic considerations, however, does it mean that India will need to create additional theatres to cater for Bangladesh and Myanmar?

The problem lies not in the number of threats, which would vary, but in how to handle the manifesting threat. The Iran imbroglio has further reinforced the need for a unified command. The United States (US) and Israeli forces operate under their own, independent commands, where plans are made and executed. However, for the ongoing Iran operation, in spite of being a joint operation, there have been instances of bombing by Israel which the Americans were

not aware of.¹ This brings out the need for unity of command to ensure integrated execution of operations. The Iranians, on the other hand, have a single unified command structure; however, execution is decentralised and left to the 31 autonomous provincial commands without any systemic coherence.² The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the *Artesh* (the Islamic Republic of Iran Army) are two parallel and independent armed entities of Iran operating within the same geography and with their own forces. The *Artesh* has its integral Army, Navy, Air Force and Air Defence (AD) Force, while the IRGC has its own Ground Force, Navy, Aerospace Force (missiles and drones), Quds Force (supporting the axis of resistance and associated militia) and the Basij Organisation (Information Warfare). These are two forces fighting independently and without strategic guidance.

India is uniquely placed because its threats are geographically contiguous and strategically intertwined. China's Western Theatre Command (WTC) independently deals with India. Pakistan does not have a separate Theatre Command (TC) to handle contingencies in its West and East. However, the Indian thought process, seemingly in the final stages of reforms, is still looking at the creation of TCs to enhance war-fighting capability. While there is no denying the fact that reforms are required in India's Higher Defence Organisation (HDO), *the solutions being discussed appear to be in a desperate search for a problem*. This article argues that the threat faced by India is singular in nature and could manifest either simultaneously or sequentially, forcing India to fight a two-front war within the same

battle-space continuum. Thus, dividing the country into TCs based on a happy compromise of threat and geography risks fragmenting strategic planning for what is essentially *one strategic problem*.

Creating Artificial Boundaries

The concept of Theatres originated before the Second World War, when forces had to be allocated and operated on separate continental fronts and across vast oceans. *Geography forced* these structures because that was what was required in those times. In India, we are trying to *force geography*, and that can prove detrimental in the long run. Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are contiguous and operationally connected, having a direct impact on each other. If dealt with by separate theatres, *strategic prioritisation* will become a major problem and be contested. A single national TC construct preserves the principle of *Unity of Command* and permits decentralised execution. More on that later. Thus, the need of the hour is to use geography to one's advantage rather than making it an excuse for fragmenting forces. We should not create artificial boundaries and further complicate the issue.

Two Front Contingency

India is one contiguous Theatre of War. Contingencies may arise with any of its neighbours, and each would constitute a separate front. We should not confuse Theatres of War with fronts and Theatres of Operations. Therefore, the opening of a front does not

require an independent force structure to be activated. Additionally, India cannot assume that conflicts with either China or Pakistan will remain geographically isolated. Threats could very rapidly become national conflicts rather than remaining regional campaigns. This further reinforces the need for a single, integrated operational theatre of war.

Multi Domain Operations (MDO) involving land, sea, air, space, and cyber forces will require synchronisation and will be carried out across the entire country simultaneously, because MDO transcend conventional domain-specific war-fighting. If cyber, space and information campaigns are all pervasive and scarce resources like force multipliers remain centrally controlled, why then should war fighting become fragmented? Fragmenting would only create parallel systems, undermining effective Command and Control (C2). A single theatre construct would instead better align with modern warfare, enabling a *system-of-systems* approach to war-fighting.

Theatre Commands are a purely military reform, and rather than addressing the elephant in the room and *appreciating the situation*, India is trying to *situate the appreciation*. Modern war fighting will not purely be a military construct. Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Hamas and US-Israel versus Iran show that national resilience, resolve, and most importantly, capability will differentiate between the victor and the vanquished. It is easy to say that the armed forces need to be reformed, but very difficult to say that the problems are systemic and at the apex level. To develop a comprehensive capability, reforms in HDO must first take place at the highest level.

India's Legacy HDO: The Need for Apex-Level Joint Planning

India's current C2 architecture is a legacy inheritance still being retained. What India needs is force-reconfiguration rather than force restructuring because the problem is *not about how we fight*, it is about *how we plan*. In India's past wars, when have the Army and the Navy been used to gain control of the air? Traditionally, the Air Force has been providing air support and shaping the battlefield for the Army and Navy; however, have the land forces ever been used to take on air force tasks like radar busting, artillery and rocket fires on airfields, and destruction of C2 nodes by their special forces? Control of the air is a prerequisite for advancing the land offensive and must be achieved jointly. Op *Sindoor*, the Ukraine-Russia war and the US-Israel war with Iran have shown the importance of gaining requisite control of air for the furtherance of all operations. Therefore, gaining and retaining control of the air becomes a national imperative to be achieved jointly, requiring centralised planning. Two or three independent theatres are not likely to achieve strategic coherence because their operational imperatives would significantly differ.

MDO requires a '*Whole-of-Nation*' approach to war-fighting, and that '*whole*' cannot further be broken down into western theatre, northern theatre or a maritime theatre. *Selection and Maintenance of Aim* is one of the most enduring Principles of War. Having multiple aims at the grand strategic or the military strategic level will go against the principle. Russia did not adhere to it in the early days of the war, and the result is there for everyone to see. In addition,

modern weapons have trans-geography reach. What if an adversary's weapon hits a target in a different Theatre Command which has not been activated? Will that theatre now respond, or will only the theatre that is supposed to deal with that particular threat respond to the event? For example, in a conflict with Pakistan, Vishakapatnam is targeted, so who will respond to it and how? The unfolding problems are myriad, and the cascading effects will be counterproductive. These issues complicate effective decision-making and further add to the confusion, and in MDO, if decision-making is compromised, the battle will be lost. To take the argument further, Distributed Denial of Services (DDoS) attacks on critical infrastructure will happen across the nation and call for a mix of kinetic and non-kinetic responses. Space, the ultimate high ground, does not distinguish between theatres, and more importantly, India's adversaries also consider India one theatre of operations. Then Why should India not respond as one integrated entity?

Realigning Operational Regional Commands

If planning needs to be done centrally at the apex level, the same is also true at the operational level of execution. The Indian Army has seven regional Commands; the Navy has three, and the Air Force has seven. A total of 17 Commands are spread across the entire country. If India were to operate as one integrated command, the existing regional commands would need to be merged and, more importantly, co-located, keeping geography and threats in mind. Strategic guidance must lead to operational coherence; therefore, we

need to change the process of execution of kinetic operations at the operational level, and that is what is meant by force reconfiguration. This can be done by creating Joint Forces Commands (JFC) based on geography, which would exercise C2 at the operational level. Merger of regional commands would enable unity of command and permit decentralised execution. These JFCs would remain *operationally subordinate* to a single national Theatre and an associated Joint Forces Head Quarters (JFHQ) in order to remain strategically coherent.³

In 2016, China realigned its forces from seven Military Regions to five Theatre Commands, each dealing with a specific threat. China's threat landscape differs from that of India because it has geographically dispersed threats and a mix of continental as well as maritime domains. The Central Theatre Command (CTC) of China defends Beijing and acts as a strategic reserve for other commands. India's strategic landscape is more concentrated and geographically contiguous, making a single integrated theatre construct more suitable.

The Single Point Advice of Matters Military

Establishing the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and creating the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) is a step in the right direction. The issue causing dissonance is that *war fighting* and *Raise, Train and Sustain (RTS) functions* have been merged, thereby creating additional reform hurdles. Clearly mandated Allocation of Business (AoB) rules by the Government of India must thus become the *first reform*. Subject Matter Experts must be able to render '*single*

point advice’ to the Government of India (GoI) on all matters related to the armed forces. This advice is *single-point* and not necessarily *single-person*. A single person makes the chain linear and susceptible to disruptions, and the same has been seen during Op-*Epic Fury*, where the death of the Supreme Leader of Iran adversely affected its apex decision-making ability.

With increased offensive capability to address strategic Centres of Gravity (CoG), targeting leadership across all levels has now become fair game. In the present construct, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) is an efficient organisation, functionally effective and brings about strategic coherence. The single point advice, therefore, must be a collegiate function by the *CDS and the three Service Chiefs* (experts in their respective domains). War fighting and RTS functions, both must remain the mandate of COSC, performed by the JFHQ (war fighting) and HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) for RTS functions headed by the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff and Secretary to the Chairman COSC (CISC) heading the DMA.

The Future of Warfare

In modern wars, kill chains have evolved into kill webs. There are no independent operations, and cyber and space are overarching capabilities capable of affecting all other domains. These form the bedrock of Multi-Domain Operations and are therefore not just the mandate of the armed forces. A national ‘*nervous system*’ is therefore the best way forward. The ability of a nation to demonstrate and adopt a ‘*whole-of-nation*’ *approach* will prove decisive in the future.

The vision document, '*The Defence Forces Vision 2047: A Roadmap for a Future-ready Indian Military*', unveiled by the Honourable Raksha Mantri (RM) on March 10, 2026, also speaks of the need for *integrating military strength with diplomatic, technological and economic power to ensure national security*.⁴ The writing on the wall is clear; it is not just about the armed forces. The armed forces are an important cog in the wheel of a nation, but they are not the only cog. All cogs need to work together to strengthen and support the wheel and serve their own distinct purposes. The armed forces function best when C2 is *simple, clear and unified*. The soldier on the battlefield, the sailor in a submarine and the pilot in the cockpit of an aircraft require clarity of instruction to enable correct tactical actions. A *One Nation-One Theatre* approach would *align India's strategy with geography, reduce bureaucratic lethargy, enhance jointness* and most importantly, *translate synergy into a coherent strategy for integrated operations*.

India's security challenges demand a fundamental rethink of the existing C2 structures. We must embrace our geopolitical landscape and geographical context to adopt a framework specifically tailored to India's strategic reality. Given the possibility of simultaneous pressure from both China and Pakistan, multiple theatres will only fragment war-fighting capability. A *One Nation-One Theatre* architecture, supported by streamlined regional commands and an integrated network for MDO, would enable India to *reduce the teeth-to-tail ratio, preserve national character and strengthen national response* in arising contingencies.

Notes

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08 Myths in Indian Debates on the Theatre Command – A Ready Reckoner for the Pursuit of Informed Discussions

A PICHIPOO RAJA

‘Post-truth’ is an adjective defined as *‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’*.¹ The debates in India around jointness and theatre commands have largely followed the post-truth trajectory. They are more based on individual experiences, hearsay, personal beliefs and not rooted in facts. This article is aimed at providing objective facts derived from government sources to help the readers form their informed opinions.

Myth 1 – The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) commented adversely on jointness during Operations in the Kargil War

If there is one document that is widely misquoted, that is the KRC Report. Despite the report being declassified, it was only available

Wg Cdr A Pichipoo Raja is a Senior Fellow, Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies.

in print. This may have led people to use Google search, which delivered incorrect secondary sources. The actual terms of reference are reproduced below:

the Union Cabinet decided on July 24, 1999 to constitute a Committee to look into this episode. The order communicating the Government's decision was issued on July 29, 1999 (Annexure 1.1) with the following Terms of Reference:

- (i) "To review the events leading up to the Pakistani aggression in the Kargil District of Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir; and**
- (ii) to recommend such measures as are considered necessary to safeguard national security against such armed intrusions."**

Image: Terms of Reference of KRC.

Source: *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 2000), p 25.

The mandate of KRC excluded the actual conduct of operations during the Kargil War, and the Committee stuck to its mandate. It did not examine events beyond May 26, 1999, when air power was employed.

However, it did not consider it appropriate to go into the details of the actual conduct of operations. That was outside its mandate and would have called for a different kind of expertise. The Committee limited itself to the period ending with the authorisation of use of air power and the Indian Armed Forces generally adopting a posture of deterrence vis-à-vis Pakistan on May 26. However, a brief outline

Image: Para 1.4 of KRC Declining to Comment on the Actual Operations.

Source: *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 2000), p 26.

Myth 2 – KRC recommended the creation of integrated Theatre Commands

Countless authors have mentioned this. It is factually incorrect and does not appear in the KRC. The recommendations were for a National Defence Headquarters.

sensual and broadbased. The present obsolete system has perpetuated the continuation of the culture of the British Imperial theatre system of an India Command whereas what is required is a National Defence Headquarters. Most opposition to change comes from inadequate knowledge of the national security decision-making process elsewhere in the world and a reluctance to change the status quo and move away from considerations of parochial interest. The status

Image: Para 14.19 of KRC.

Source: *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 2000), p 258.

KRC recommended better civil-military integration and did not mention any integration of the three services.

Forces. An objective assessment of the last 52 years will show that the country is lucky to have scraped through various national security threats without too much damage, except in 1962. The country can no longer afford such ad hoc functioning. The Committee therefore recommends that the entire gamut of national security management and apex decision-making and the structure and interface between the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces Headquarters be comprehensively studied and reorganised.

Image: Para 14.19 of KRC.

Source: *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications Pvt. Limited, 2000), p 259.

Myth 3 – There is a serious problem of jointness in the Indian Armed Forces

There has been no government-led high-level review of military operations since the 1962 Sino-India War. KRC also examined what led to the war, and not how it was fought. Only a thorough, in-depth enquiry into Indian military operations from the operational records by a suitable committee would reveal the prevalence/extent of the issue. In the absence of this, any arguments regarding the lack/abundance of jointness are either anecdotal or hearsay and devoid of factual evidence.

Myth 4 – The Goldwater-Nichols Act led to the creation of Theatre Commands in the US

The Theatre Commands in the United States (US) were created in 1946 as a result of the implementation of the Unified Command Plan.² The United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) was the first to be established as a unified command on January 1, 1947.³ Therefore, any argument that the creation of theatre commands in the US as a direct outcome of the Goldwater-Nichols Act is factually incorrect.

Myth 5 – Creation of Theatre Commands automatically leads to jointness

A popular argument is that the creation of theatre commands automatically results in jointness. If the creation of theatre commands

leads to jointness, then the US should not have experienced disasters in Vietnam, Operation Eagle Claw, etc. They would not have had any reason to implement the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986 to resolve the issues in jointness, as the theatre commands were initially established in 1947. Therefore, this argument lacks empirical support.

Myth 6 – In the US, the commands of all the armed forces are co-located. In India, 17 single-service commands of all three services are located in different areas, resulting in a lack of jointness.

This is another popular misconception. The table below shows the location of each Component Command Headquarters (HQ) in the US geographic Combatant Commands (Space Command is not shown).

Unified Combatant Command	Army Component HQ	Air Force Component HQ	Navy Component HQ	Marine Component HQ
U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)	U.S. Army Africa – Vicenza, Italy	U.S. Air Forces Africa – Ramstein AB, Germany	U.S. Naval Forces Africa – Naples, Italy	U.S. Marine Forces Africa – Stuttgart, Germany
U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)	U.S. Army Central – Shaw AFB, South Carolina	U.S. Air Forces Central – Shaw AFB, South Carolina	U.S. Naval Forces Central – Manama, Bahrain	U.S. Marine Forces Central – Tampa, Florida
U.S. European Command (EUCOM)	U.S. Army Europe and Africa – Wiesbaden, Germany	U.S. Air Forces Europe and Air Forces Africa – Ramstein AB, Germany	U.S. Naval Forces Europe – Naples, Italy	U.S. Marine Forces Europe and Africa – Stuttgart, Germany
U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM)	U.S. Army Pacific – Fort Shafter, Hawaii	Pacific Air Forces – Hickam AFB, Hawaii	U.S. Pacific Fleet – Pearl Harbor, Hawaii	U.S. Marine Forces Pacific – Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii
U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM)	U.S. Army North – Fort Sam Houston, Texas	First Air Force (AFNORTH) – Tyndall AFB, Florida	U.S. Fleet Forces Command (NAVNORTH) – Virginia	U.S. Marine Forces North – Norfolk, Virginia
U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM)	U.S. Army South – Fort Sam Houston, Texas	Twelfth Air Force (AFSOUTH) – Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona	U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command – Mayport, Florida	U.S. Marine Forces South – New Orleans, Louisiana

Source: Table created by the Author using information from the US Department of War Website.⁴

The table clearly shows the dispersed locations, with some even spread across multiple continents. Therefore, this too is post-truth. However, in the past, during Operations, some component commanders were occasionally co-located at a forward headquarters, although not always.

Myth 7 – Most countries have Theatre Commands; therefore, India must too

During the post-World War II era, the world was divided into two camps. The popular choice was between the two. However, India declined both and adopted the Non-Alignment Movement. Thus, India has never fallen for following the crowd, even when it was weak and poor. Many countries have an obligation to align their doctrines and structures due to their commitment to fight as an alliance. India has no reason to follow this approach without careful consideration. It must do what suits best in the national interest.

Myth 8 – China created Theatre Commands to bring in jointness in the Armed Forces

The primary aim of the Chinese military is to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC).⁵ The threat to CPC leadership also comes from the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as it serves as an alternate power centre. Following the reforms in 2015, which involved the creation of theatre commands and the Strategic Support Force (PLASSF), among other measures, President Xi also carried out a reduction of 300,000 personnel in the Army.⁶ Since the 1970s, the PLA has reduced the size of its forces by 4 million and altered the ratio of its forces. It has reduced the Army while increasing the Navy and Air Force. The Army now accounts for less than 50 per cent of the total armed forces.⁷ These reforms are primarily meant to spread the distribution of power that was concentrated in the Army through the erstwhile Military Regions.⁸ PLASSF's

growth as a centre of power is also presumed to be one of the reasons that led to Xi disbanding it in 2024. During the announcement of the new Information Support Force creation, Xi's statement read, *'ordered to resolutely obey the Party's command, and make sure it stays absolutely loyal, pure and reliable'*.⁹

Today, the primary go-to source for information is Large Language Models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT and videos on social media. LLMs curate data from the internet and produce results. Thus, if the data on the internet is incorrect, the results the LLMs generate are bound to be false as well. There is a renewed rigour in the debate on the creation of theatre commands in the country. As a result, there has been a surge in misleading articles and discussions. These invariably populate the database of LLMs and further reinforce false data. Informed debates are essential for the healthy functioning of democracy. One of the most critical military reforms in India must be based on facts, not post-truths. The issue must be objectively debated beyond the military by civilians as well. This article aims to provide an authentic basis to the citizens for such discussions.

Notes

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Revisiting the Eight Decade History of Indian Jointness: Drawing the Right Lessons from Op Sindoor

A PICHIPPOO RAJA

Introduction

Operation *Sindoor* was the first significant armed conflict after the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in August 2019. Since the establishment of CDS, there has been a consistent focus on jointness and shedding of single-service interests. Thus, over time, it has become almost sacrilegious to speak of individual service interests. Jointness is now the accepted convention. While the actions of the Indian Air Force (IAF) during Op *Sindoor* resulted in spectacular outcomes, many of which were caught on camera, there have been no attempts by the IAF to boast about their achievements. Likewise, considering the damage observed on

the Indian border villages inflicted by Pakistan, it would be safe to assume that the Indian Army's response would have been far more devastating on Pakistan. Similarly, no attempts were made to showcase them either. The tri-service press briefs have been well-coordinated and included the actions of the Navy, which were out of public sight. Another key aspect is the visible synergistic action of the Ministries of External Affairs (MEA) and Defence (MoD). In 2019, the initial press brief, following the Balakot strikes, was delivered by the Foreign Secretary with no MoD representation. Whereas in Op *Sindoor*, both MEA and MoD representatives participated in all press briefings. Thus, this operation could be studied in future as a textbook case of synergy in national security.

The concept of 'theaterisation' has been popularised as a solution to a perceived lack of jointness in the Indian Armed Forces. Various authors have proposed several models. However, in the absence of theatre commands, what explains the synergy during Op *Sindoor*? I attempt an explanation.

The results for this synergy can be traced back to 1944, when the original seeds of jointness were planted in India. The Government of Sudan, recognising the valour and sacrifice of Indians in the Second World War in the defence of Sudan, gifted an amount of £ 1,00,000 for the construction of an Indian national war memorial. The Indian National War Memorial Committee of Council was constituted.

APPENDIX 'A' (Contd)

<u>Proposed by HR the Government of</u>	<u>Proposal</u>	<u>Reasons and Remarks</u>
9. PUNJAB	A <u>military academy</u> to serve all three Services.	An educational establishment would be of greater practical value than an architectural memorial.
10. BOMBAY	A <u>military academy</u> for the three Services but Ministers unofficially add the rider that it should be open to "all Indians whether coming from Pakistan or Hindustan".	
11. GUJARAT	<u>Military Academy</u> . The cost should certainly be mainly borne by Govt who could provide the necessities and the National War Memorial Fund could provide the amenities such as a good library and gymnasium for games etc. Architecturally the building could be designed to commemorate the gallantry of the Indian Fighting Forces.	Utilitarian age. So much remains to be done to improve the condition of soldiers and ex-soldiers. It seems better to go in for some practical scheme rather than a monument.

Image: Extract of Proposals of the Indian National War Memorial Committee of Council.
Source: The National Archives of India.

This committee, after a thorough debate, recommended the construction of a tri-services military academy as the most suitable form of a war memorial.

Following this decision, another subcommittee was formed to study and make recommendations for the Indian Military Academy. The Subcommittee thus recommended the creation of what is now known as the National Defence Academy (NDA) with the iconic Sudan Block as its central structure.

Sudan Government's Gift

159. We have been asked to submit a separate recommendation regarding the use to which the gift of £100,000 by the Sudan Government should be devoted.

This gift was made in appreciation of the distinguished Services rendered by formations of the Indian Army in the campaign in Eritrea and Abyssinia 1940-41.

We feel it appropriate, therefore, that the gift, with such additional amount as may prove necessary, should be devoted to the erection of some particular memorial building which would stand in perpetuity as the centre of the existence of the Academy, which is in itself a memorial.

Image: Extract of Recommendations of the Sub-Committee
Source: The National Archives of India

The Subcommittee included Vice-Chancellors from universities, the principal of a school, and members of all three services, including then-Wing Commander Subroto Mukerjee, who later became the Air Chief. They toured eleven military academies across the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Canada, studying in detail the training, syllabus, moral code of conduct, general orientation, and other aspects

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INTRODUCTORY

Composition.

1. Our Sub-Committee consisted of the following members :

Chairman : Major-General D. R. BATEMAN,

G. H. Q., India Command.

Pandit AMARANATHA JHA,

Vice-Chancellor, Allahabad University.

Khan Bahadur MIAN AFZAL HUSSAIN,

Late Vice-Chancellor, Punjab University.

W. X. MASCARENHAS, Esq.,

Late Principal, Poona Engineering College.

Captain J. W. JEFFORD, R. I. N.,

Naval Headquarters, India.

Wing Commander S. MUKERJEE, R. I. A. F.,

Air Headquarters, India.

Secretary : Lieutenant-Colonel W. E. WILLIAMSON,

C. in C.'s Secretariat.

2. The object of the visit was :—

To study the working of certain Naval, Military, and Air Force cadet training institutions with the purpose of incorporating their best features in the National War Memorial Academy which it is proposed to set up in India.

Image: Composition of the Sub-Committee and Objectives.

Source: The National Archives of India.

Indian Armed Forces officers, fresh from the experience of the Second World War, understood the significance of integration. None

of the countries across the world then had a joint military academy. Thus, their proposal for a joint academy was novel.

5. In all the countries we visited, we found a keen appreciation of the need for close integration of the training of cadets, or young officers, for the various services.

Great interest was shown in the Indian proposal to train the cadets of all services at the one Academy. The majority of the officers, with the exception of some Naval officers with whom we discussed the proposal commended it warmly.

Image: Extract of the Report of the Sub-Committee on Military Academy.

Source: The National Archives of India.

In terms of integration, considerable thought and discussion went into the design of the training. To date, NDA follows this model of common training for all three services in the first two years, followed by the introduction of service-specific training in the third year.

To decide when specialisation should begin has raised many problems.

The Navy and Air Force are both acutely concerned with the necessity of providing early indoctrination and at the same time not prejudicing academic graduation.

It is well at this point to review our conception of the general purpose of the Academy which is not to produce trained officers of any Service but to offer a sound educational background with indoctrination with the fundamentals of all three Services and in particular the Service in which the cadet will be commissioned.

It is our opinion that this purpose can best be achieved by postponing specialisation to as late as possible. After careful consideration we suggest this should be done at the end of the second year.

Image: Extract of the Report of the Sub-Committee on Military Academy.

Source: The National Archives of India.

The training was also designed to foster a deeper appreciation of each other's perspectives. All cadets were supposed to have sufficient

exposure to aviation to make them 'air-minded'. A lack of air-mindedness is often cited as the key cause by proponents of air power when issues of jointness are argued. Unfortunately, paragraph 148(d) is no longer part of the NDA training. It is perhaps worth revisiting this recommendation from 1945. The formation of the National Defence Academy (NDA) laid the groundwork for jointness among the Indian Armed Forces (the first seed of jointness).

During Academic Years

148. The following subjects of Service training should be carried out during the Academic Years for all cadets :—

- (a) Frequent ceremonial parades,**
- (b) Physical and recreational training,**
- (c) Swimming,**
- (d) Sufficient aviation in order to make all cadets air minded,**
- (e) Leadership training as described in a preceding paragraph.**

Image: Aspect of Air-Mindedness Amongst all as an Essential Training Requirement.
Source: The National Archives of India.

Admission into NDA was to be purely based on merit and devoid of any form of reservation, including that for the wards of ex-servicemen.

Admission to the Academy will be governed by merit alone. The working committee of the NDA has decided not to reserve any vacancies for sons of personnel of the Armed Forces. The application form submitted by candidates for admission to the Academy, it has been further agreed, need not contain recommendations relating to character and suitability, but will be confined to factual information.

Image: Recommendations on Selection and Admission.
Source: The National Archives of India

This gave rise to a new problem: *How could independent India generate a pool of suitable candidates to meet the annual requirement of an intake of 700 officer cadets from across the country's diverse locations and varying income statuses when the educational setup in India was inferior?* This led to the creation of Feeder institutes. Thus, the second seed for jointness — the feeder institutes was planted. These institutes offer joint military training right from class six onwards. The students go on to occupy leadership positions across various fields beyond the military as well.

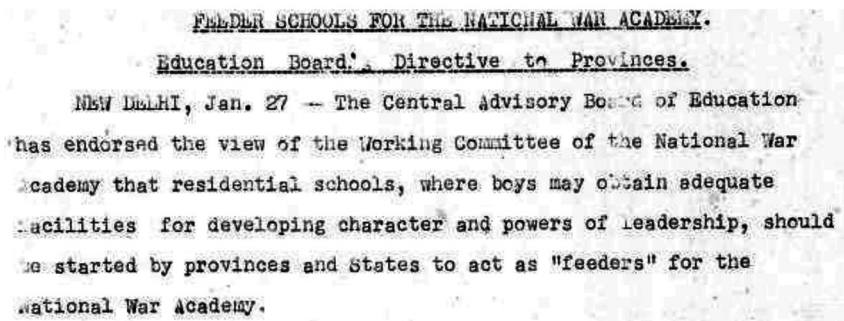


Image: Extract of Press Information Bureau Release, MoD, January 27, 1947.

Source: Press Information Bureau Archives.¹

Returning to the key question of this article, what explains the synergy during Op *Sindoor*? The answer lies in the bonhomie between the service chiefs. Army and Navy chiefs are classmates from Sainik School Rewa, and the Air Chief and the Army Chief are course mates from NDA.² These are lifelong relationships with the equivalent of a family-level bond characterised by depth and strength. People go to great lengths for each other. Both feeder institutes (schools) and NDA are Indian investments in jointness, even before independence

and were pathbreaking in the world at the time of their inception. To put it differently, India has been a pioneer of jointness in the world. Therefore, if any shortcomings in jointness are perceived, it would be prudent to examine the training, staffing and culture at NDA and similar institutes as the source. Deviations from the core founding principles of any institution are possible as it evolves over time.

Finally, Colin Gray wrote, *“Joint, which is to say multi-service, doctrine should express a judicious melding of beliefs among culturally distinct institutions, but often it comprises more of a brute force stapling together of unlike elements than a coherent whole. So-called joint military plans and performance similarly can have the character of a shotgun marriage than of anything resembling harmony.”*³ Neglecting one’s own history and pursuing solutions from foreign models can lead to a stapled model of jointness or a ‘shotgun marriage’. It is worthwhile to revisit the history of jointness in India, in depth, to avoid such a situation.

Notes

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Group Captain **VP Naik, VM** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force in June 1999 in the fighter stream. He is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington and College of Air Warfare, Secunderabad. The officer holds an MSc in Defence and Strategic Studies and an MPhil. He has been an Instructor at the College of Air Warfare and is presently posted as a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS).

. . .



Wing Commander **Pichipoo Raja** was commissioned in the Indian Air Force in June 2008 in the helicopter stream. He is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Defence Services Staff College and a graduate of the prestigious Warfare and Aerospace Strategy Programme (WASP). He is currently the Programme Director for WASP and posted as a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies (CAPSS). The Officer is currently pursuing his PhD from Pondicherry University.