

Before The Next Crisis: The Case for Apex-Level National Security Exercises in India



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Introduction

Modern conflicts have compressed decision timelines. This can expose institutional gaps before anyone has time to close them. The Galwan clash of June 2020 escalated from a patrol-level incident to a bilateral military standoff within hours. Operation *Sindoor* saw simultaneous action across military, diplomatic, information, and narrative domains. The window for action was so narrow that there was hardly any time for inter-ministerial consultation. These events have indicated that India's instruments of national power can operate in isolation, but have never been required to work in coordination, especially under pressure. No mechanism exists to rehearse that coordination before a crisis demands it.

This article proposes a biennial national security exercise akin to a wargame. It is proposed to be structured in three sequential stages: the service level, the ministerial level, and the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) level. Conducting this exercise requires no legislation, no new institution, and no reorganisation of mandates. The *Raksha Mantri* (RM) will initiate the exercise, and the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) will execute it. It is to be conducted confidentially, so that frank institutional assessment carries no political risk.

The Structural Gap

India's higher defence architecture has been substantially reformed since the Kargil conflict. The creation of the CDS,¹ the Department of Military Affairs, the Defence Intelligence Agency, and

ongoing theaterisation efforts have all improved coordination within the military system. However, the problem these reforms do not address is the one that matters most in a modern contingency—simultaneity. Modern warfare requires precise alignment of diplomatic signalling, information management, cyber response, industrial mobilisation, and economic measures with military action towards a common strategic objective.

The Government of India's Allocation of Business (AoB) Rules assign each domain to a separate ministry. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) handles diplomacy; the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) covers internal security; the Ministry of Defence (MoD) is responsible for external security; the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) handles information and cyber. It is an administrative design for peacetime governance. In a crisis, however, this system produces a sequential response when the situation demands a convergent one. Each ministry responds within its mandate. The cross-domain consequences are handled separately, and mostly later.

The Doklam standoff (2017) illustrated this precisely. Diplomatic and military options were managed largely in parallel, with informal coordination that was dependent on individuals rather than institutional mechanisms.² The CCS sits at the apex of the system and holds responsibility for major security decisions.³ Below the CCS, however, no standing institution exists with the authority to integrate all instruments of national power into a single campaign design, in peacetime or in war.

There is a further gap. Currently, no legal framework can accommodate private-sector capabilities like technology firms, logistics companies, and communications infrastructure in a crisis response. Their participation in any contingency would be improvised. A structured exercise is the only mechanism that can identify, in advance, what is needed and on what terms. India's armed forces test their operational plans through rigorous exercises. The question is how the national response architecture, which encompasses far more than the military, can be subjected to the same discipline and scrutiny.

How is this different?

The integration problems identified above are not newly discovered. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC)⁴ in 2000 identified intelligence coordination failures that triggered a Group of Ministers (GoM) review. That review recommended sweeping reforms, including creating the CDS. The CCS formally accepted the GoM report in May 2001, but held the CDS recommendation specifically in abeyance,

pending cross-party consultations that were never concluded. The recommendation remained deferred for eighteen years, through multiple governments. The Naresh Chandra Task Force revisited civil-military integration at the apex level in 2012. Its recommendations have largely remained on paper. Every major change requires a legal arrangement, budget support, and political backing across multiple governments.

This proposal requires none of that. It just requires an RM directive and a CDS mandate. It works within the existing institutional framework. Its value is not only the preparedness it builds, but also the body of evidence it creates. It would stress-test the national response architecture and highlight potential breakdowns. Hence, it would justify any structural reform as politically inevitable rather than theoretically desirable.

Stakeholder Engagement

The exercise's success is dependent upon each institution's understanding of what it gains and not merely what it contributes. The following makes the case for each stakeholder directly.

(a) ***The Raksha Mantri:*** The RM bears constitutional responsibility for national defence. In a modern contingency, that responsibility extends well beyond operational control of the armed forces. Actions in diplomacy, economy, industrial mobilisation, and information operations all affect conflict outcomes. The RM is ultimately accountable for these outcomes, yet none of these factors is under the MoD's direct authority. A national security exercise, initiated by the RM and debriefed to the RM, is a management audit of national security preparedness that no other instrument currently provides. It gives the RM an honest, pre-crisis assessment of whether the institutional apparatus can perform under pressure. It is to be conducted as a closed-door, confidential engagement. This would allow stakeholders to actively engage without reservations. The chain of authority established above gives the exercise institutional weight. This way, it would not remain just a staff-level activity.

(b) ***The Chief of Defence Staff:*** The exercise directly serves the CDS's mandate for jointness in training and inter-service coordination. A simulation that reveals where civilian support in fields of cyber, logistics, information management, and industrial supply is unavailable or uncoordinated is precisely the evidence needed to make a credible, documented case for structural investment. Exercise findings become the authoritative basis for capability requirements, displacing planning assumptions that can currently be contested

in budget negotiations without a factual counter. The CDS executes the exercise on the RM's mandate, building on existing joint training and inter-service coordination responsibilities.

(c) Civilian Ministries: Any civilian ministry would protect its institutional autonomy. An exercise that has the potential to expose interdepartmental gaps in coordination would threaten that autonomy. Three points make participation in their interest. First, the exercise is confidential, and findings are not publicly released. Second, any gaps observed during the exercise can be filled before an actual crisis. Third, the exercise provides them a forum to raise all performance constraints on record. That is a constructive outcome for any institution with serious responsibilities.

(d) The Prime Minister's Office: CCS participation does not translate to the Prime Minister's (PM) mandatory attendance. The standard format is the delegated model. The National Security Advisor (NSA) or Cabinet Secretary distil exercise findings into a brief and a set of response options for the PM's review. The PM may participate directly in major planned iterations, when the evidence base warrants apex engagement. The CCS is not being asked to conduct warfighting. It is being asked to verify that its national security response decision can actually be implemented. It is a question of decision quality, not an operational one.

A Phased Approach

The exercise is structured in three phases. Each phase's lessons are incorporated as settings for the next phase.

Table 1: Phased Exercise Structure and Whole-of-Nation Gains

Phase	Action	Outcomes
Phase One	CDS chairs service-level exercise with limited inter-ministry representation. NSCS provides intelligence environment. No new institution required.	First documented assessment of where national response capacity actually resides vs. where it is assumed. Cross-domain response database created. Immediate command-authority and communication gaps identified.
Years 1–2		
Establishing the Baseline		
Phase Two	RM formally mandates the exercise. NSCS-chaired ministerial tabletop added as the second tier. Civilian ministry	First tested operating procedure for the initial 72 hours of a contingency. Civilian mobilisation protocols established. Interdepartmental friction documented
Years 3–4		
Building the Architecture		

	participation determined by the scenario, not by representation.	and addressable before a crisis exposes it.
Phase Three	Full three-stage exercise operationalised. NSA/Cabinet Secretary briefs PM. Direct CCS participation reserved for major biennial iterations at RM's initiative.	Tested national response capacity across all instruments of power. Response database becomes foundation for AI-assisted decision-support calibrated to India's own institutional experience.
Year 5 Onwards		
Apex Integration		

Source: Author's Conceptualisation

The history of Indian defence reform suggests that exercises without consequences become performances. The following mechanisms give this exercise institutional weight:

- (a) **Exercise Reports:** A timeline would be set for submitting an immediate exercise report to the RM and the NSA. This ensures that this report does not get buried under bureaucratic cholesterol. Additionally, with them reviewing these reports, the follow-up action would be firm and lasting.
- (b) **Budget:** The body of evidence that this exercise generates provides respective ministries with a better card during budget negotiation. This gives ministries a direct incentive to engage seriously. The gaps they identify become their claims; gaps exposed by the exercise become their liabilities.
- (c) **Cadre:** Cadre review and revision can serve as an institutional mechanism for linking senior participation in national security exercises to the professional assessment cycle. This mechanism already exists within the military and can be extended to civilian ministry executives through the RM's office without statutory change.
- (d) **Repetition:** It is expected that successive iterations would transform this exercise into a sought-after event. It would become an organisational culture to identify gaps in a controlled environment.

An exercise conducted every two years, with formal oversight, would become part of the national security calendar. Over successive iterations, the institutional culture would shift accordingly.

One further distinction matters. This proposal will not be deferred as the CDS recommendation was, because it does not require the same kind of political consensus. The CDS required a Cabinet decision on a new post, cross-party consultation, and inter-service agreement.

An RM directive for a biennial exercise requires none of these. It is an executive decision within the RM's existing authority.

Conclusion

India does not lack national power. It lacks a tested architecture for deploying that power in a coordinated manner at the pace modern conflict demands. Phase One can be initiated within eighteen months of an RM directive, using existing infrastructure.

The proposal here is not a reform. It is an exercise. The institutional learning accumulated through each cycle will eventually produce the kind of structural reform recommended since Kargil but never adequately implemented. This is not because the recommendations were wrong, but because no body of evidence was compelling enough to override institutional inertia. This exercise creates that body of evidence.

None of this is going to be simple. It would require sustained political commitment and disciplined follow-up action to bring about institutional change. The cost of that commitment is low relative to what it produces. The cost of discovering coordination failures during an actual crisis, at the pace Galwan or Operation *Sindoor* demonstrated, is considerably higher.

Note

The exercise design is addressed in a separate document intended for the exercise planners. It would cover aspects related to scenario, rules of engagement, phases, participants and their roles, debrief, and follow-up. The present article confines itself to the institutional case for the exercise and the governance architecture within which it operates.

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

Notes:-

¹ India, Ministry of Defence. "Cabinet Approves Creation of the Post of Chief of Defence Staff." Press Information Bureau, December 24, 2019. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1597425>.

² A. K. Bardalai, "Doklam and the Indo-China Boundary," *Journal of Defence Studies* 12, no. 1 (January–March 2018): 5–13. <https://idsa.in/publisher/journal-of-defence-studies/doklam-and-the-indo-china-boundary>.

³ India. Cabinet Secretariat. "Composition of the Cabinet Committee on Security." May 27, 2009. Accessed July 31, 2026. https://cabsec.gov.in/writereaddata/cabinetcommittees/english/1_Upload_3218.pdf, p. 1.

⁴ Kargil Review Committee. *From Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000. The GoM report is formally titled: Government of India. *Reforming the National Security System: Recommendations of the Group of Ministers on National Security*. New Delhi: Government of India, February 26, 2001. <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf>.

