

October Lessons for Indian Military Reforms



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One October, I took my daughter to the cleaning activity organised as part of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*. She was excited to wear gloves and a mask and be part of the team. While we were waiting for everyone to arrive, she asked, “Dad, why do we need to clean this place?” I explained the virtues of cleaning, why it is good to maintain something clean, the benefits of community exercises, etc. She patiently listened and then replied, “No, I am not asking that. I am asking why there is garbage lying here. Don’t the people know they have to put the waste in the dustbin? In my school, there is a big bunny dustbin where we kids drop our trash.” So, why did this Eureka never occur to me earlier until the child asked? It is because we usually don’t question popular beliefs and assumptions.

Every October, the media is filled with images of officials and leaders cleaning, sweeping, and picking up garbage. On other days, it is common for people to share images of littered spaces on social media, tag all the relevant municipal bodies and political leadership for action. Yet, the fact is that garbage doesn’t grow out of thin air - someone has to drop it there. The fundamental problem is not a lack of picking up waste; the real problem is the garbage being thrown. Since the focus is on picking up garbage, the real issue of littering remains unaddressed. Result: year after year of *Swachh Bharat* drives and an eternal quest for cleanliness. Indian defence reforms are built on similar misdiagnosis.

Indian Defence Reforms—a Case Built on Misdiagnosis

India has a structural politico-military problem. Yet it has often been misdiagnosed as a structural inter-services problem. A strong reason is the abundance of [misinformation](#) on the topic. For example, the regional command headquarters of all three services being [located separately](#) is often

cited as a reason for lack of jointness. However, even in the United States of America (USA), they are geographically separate. For example, in the ongoing Operation Epic Fury, the theatre commander (CENTCOM Commander) is orchestrating the ongoing war from their headquarters in Florida, USA, which is not even located in the area of operations. Their naval component is headquartered in [Bahrain](#), while the Army has a forward headquarters in Kuwait. So how can the US military fight wars effectively despite not being co-located? It is because it is co-located at the politico-military level. There is only one Pentagon and no separate individual service headquarters. All headquarters of the US Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, etc., are located inside the Pentagon. Likewise, each service's [posture statement](#), which provides the broad strategic guidance, is a document signed jointly by both the Secretaries of the Army/ Navy/ Air Force and the service Chiefs. India currently lacks this level of integration at the apex level.

Civil-Military Relations or Jointness—What affected India's wars more?

The outcome of India's wars has depended more on apex-level relations than on inter-service jointness. The 1962 War was preceded by a decade of unsettled relations between the services and the Ministry of Defence (MoD). In 1953, Admiral Mark Pizey wrote that the Defence Secretary, H.M. Patel, was "very anxious to clip the wings of the Army C-in-C."¹ In 1955, the title of 'Commander-in-Chief' for the service chiefs was abolished with unusual hurry. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had to [speak](#) to Mr M.K. Vellodi, the Defence Secretary, to hold the order until he discussed the matter with the chiefs, while assuring that the decision wouldn't be reversed. Relations worsened after Krishna Menon was appointed the Defence Minister in 1957. After an uncomfortable working relationship, General Kodandera Subayya Thimayya, the Army Chief, submitted his [resignation](#) on August 31, 1959. Though the resignation was subsequently withdrawn, the environment continued to be turbulent throughout and was one of the key reasons for the defeat in 1962.

In the second instance during Kargil, significant turmoil existed between the MoD and service headquarters in the year preceding the Kargil War. This ultimately led to the dismissal of Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat from service on December 31, 1998. It was the only occasion in India that a service chief was dismissed.

On the other hand, during successful operations like 1971 and 2025, the relations were excellent. The political leaders and the military shared a healthy relationship. Thus, politico-military relations are directly correlated with war outcomes.

Indian Civil-Military Relations: A Faulty Colonial Inheritance that is now Fortified

As one travels in the metro from the airport to the city in New Delhi, two colossal buildings stand as testimony to this disjointedness. The Army and the Naval Headquarters, both massive and commanding—yet, located away from the government. This civil-military structure is one of the most significant yet under-debated colonial inheritances. The British kept the Indian military in cantonments physically away from the public. The British deliberately kept Indians out of higher defence roles. While the bureaucracy (the Indian Civil Services) [opened](#) to Indians in higher ranks much earlier in 1864, the higher defence was exclusively staffed by the British till independence. This inadvertently encouraged a policy of distancing the Indian military leadership from the government at the time of independence. This was subsequently codified as policy in 1961 when the armed forces headquarters were designated as ‘Attached Offices’ to the Ministry of Defence. This continues to date.

Bogey of Coup

The possibility of a coup has often been cited as a reason to keep the military at an arm’s length. It may explain why no military officer has ever been appointed National Security Advisor in India. In other countries, military experience is usually desirable for similar appointments. Yet, there is no evidence that the Indian military has ever shown such intentions. Even during the most vulnerable times of Indian democracy, like the Emergency in 1975, the military stuck to its mandate. Hypothetically speaking, if the Indian military had such intentions, then Andaman could have become a country long ago. The C-in-C Andaman and Nicobar Command, along with a Lieutenant Governor who could be a veteran, could have orchestrated a coup and become independent. Yet this hasn’t happened, or even been discussed, proving that fear of a coup in India is wildly exaggerated. Authors like Steven I. Wilkinson attribute this to deliberate efforts by politicians to structurally prevent a coup, while others like RR Chaudhary argue that it stems from India’s strategic culture.

Integrated Defence Staff or Integrated Military Staff? —The Intent vs Outcome

The military’s confinement to the periphery and its impact are well documented. The Kargil Review Committee opined that India was the only major democracy where the Armed Forces Headquarters were outside the government.² The first recommendation of the Group of Ministers Report of 2000 subsequently recommended changing the status of armed forces headquarters from

‘Attached Offices’ and reforming them as ‘Integrated Headquarters of the MoD.’³ The spirit behind this reform was to enhance synergy between the Ministry of Defence and the service headquarters. However, instead of integrating the service headquarters and the MoD, a new Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) was created. It would be apt to call it the Integrated Military Staff now, as the civilian vacancies haven’t been appropriately filled. The result is best captured by the [press release](#) of MoD on the occasion of the silver jubilee of HQ IDS. It said, “Over the past two-and-a-half decades, HQ IDS has evolved as the apex institution driving jointness, integration and synergy among the three Services, with a focus on capability enhancement and joint employment of combat power in line with national security objectives.” Thus, an organisation created to improve relations at the apex level has resigned itself to the task of improving inter-services relations due to a lack of civilian participation.⁴

One of the most ambitious reforms of post-independence India is the creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA). But its charter has once again been largely confined to bringing about jointness between the [armed forces](#). Even in the DMA, only one civilian post at the AS/JS level is [filled](#), while the entire military posts are filled.

Jointness in the Indian Military—A Case of Perfect is the Enemy of the Good

As of October 2026, the following mechanisms/structures exist in India for bringing in jointness in the armed forces:

1. DMA.
2. HQ IDS.
3. Joint training establishments like NDA, DSSC, CDM, etc.
4. Tri-service commands like Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), Strategic Forces Command (SFC).
5. Tri-service agencies like Defence Space Agency, Defence Cyber Agency.
6. [Advance Headquarters](#) (IA-IAF Command HQ) and Maritime Air Ops Centre (IAF-IN Command HQ).
7. Tactical Air Centres.

A lot has been achieved due to sustained efforts of all these entities. The govt subsequently [declared](#) on May 18, 2025 that “India’s ability to project strength across land, sea, and air is no longer theoretical- it is structured, synchronised, and deeply integrated. The nation’s tri-services

architecture now operates as a cohesive force.” Some shortcomings in cohesion will always remain since picture-perfect jointness is achievable only in choreographed peacetime exercises and war games. Actual wars are chaotic, abundant with fog and friction.

Disjointed and Duplicated—Service HQ and MoD

Except in the aerial domain, there is hardly any duplication among the armed forces. World over, usually armies don't want to own ships; navies don't want to operate tanks, while both want to own aircraft, drones, and air defence systems. In India, even if one adds the total number of all the aircraft, drones and air defence assets of all three services, the numbers are grossly inadequate for a country of India's size and threat landscape. However, in India there is significant duplication between the services headquarters and the MoD because for several functions that service headquarters carry out, there is almost a mirror desk in the MoD.

One of the first reforms instituted by PM Narendra Modi after taking office in 2014 was a directive that no file should move more than **four layers**. Yet, this is not the case of the military. For example, in the case of capability building, each file sequentially moves from top to bottom, with each headquarters having several layers within itself.

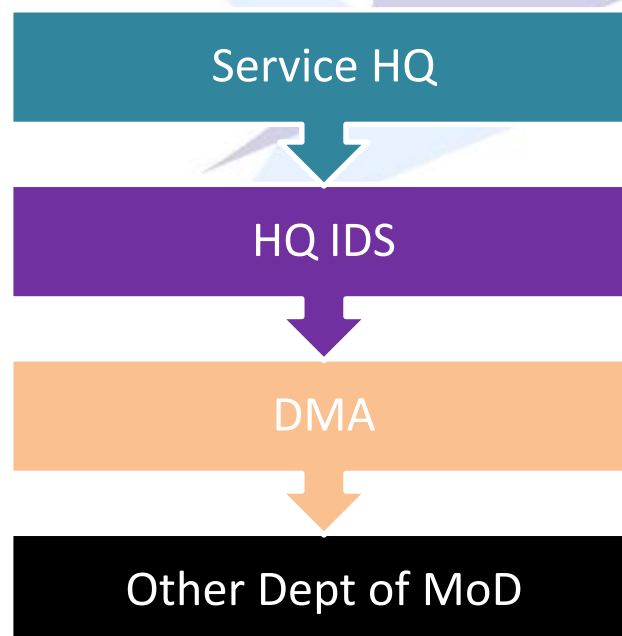


Image: Depiction of File movement in Indian Defence created by the author

Since there is no common network connecting all the entities above, the files move physically between each of them, causing huge delays. The **Defence Communication Network (DCN)** is also

designed to integrate only the services, HQ IDS and SFC, making it a Military Communication Network. It **doesn't extend** to the MoD. Thus, delayed decisions, delayed acquisitions and depleting capability are structurally inbuilt into the system.

Way Ahead

The US military is integrated at the top. China has leapfrogged by employing a national policy of **Military-Civil Fusion**. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on August 03, 2026, **declared** that '*Military-civil integration is key to a robust defence ecosystem to tackle emerging challenges.*' Some steps mentioned below will help achieve this.

1. **Change Service Headquarters to Departments of MoD and collocate:** While the politically tougher decision to appoint a CDS has been implemented, this small but significant step has been delayed. Until civilians and the military are co-located, share a healthy relationship, and tap each other's strengths, real cohesion and speedy capability building will remain a distant dream.
2. **Appoint a Committee for Civil-Military Reforms:** Solutions to problems need to start from a correct diagnosis. A committee involving both the military and civilians from diverse disciplines is essential to study this issue afresh and offer recommendations. National Defence Academy, which has done yeoman service to the country, was born out of one such **committee**.
3. **Delineate the role and missions of each service at CCS Level:** In the existing set-up, no one service has clear **roles and tasks**. **This is the origin of duplication.** The publicly discussed solutions involve creating more headquarters and appointing arbiters to solve this. This approach, like the garbage case study discussed in the beginning, will once again result in more and more headquarters without solving the underlying cause. The US recognised this as early as 1948 and instituted initial measures such as the Key West Agreement. This has since evolved through several iterations.

Problems in the Indian military result from a faulty structure of civil-military relations. Yet the proposed solutions aim only to improve inter-service relations. The national interest requires a fundamental rethinking of the issue.

(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 Letter from Admiral Mark Pizey to Admiral Mountbatten. Quoted in Anit Mukherjee, *The Absent Dialogue: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Military in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 40.

² From *Surprise to Reckoning: The Kargil Review Committee Report* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 258-259.

³ Group of Ministers, Government of India, *Reforming the National Security System: Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2001), p. 99.

⁴ Lok Sabha, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, "Report of the Standing Committee on Defence: Status of the Implementation of Unified Command for Armed Forces," February 29, 2009, pp. 1-46, <https://sansad.in/ls/committee/departementally-related-standing-committees/7-Defence-nameH=%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%95%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B7%E0%A4%BE>. Accessed on October 20, 2026.

