



## INDIA'S INTEGRATED COMMANDS: WHAT NOT TO DO LESSONS FROM THE USA

*Gp Capt RR Chaudhary*

Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies

30 December 2019 was a significant day in the history of the Indian military- the government announced the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). The creation of the CDS resulted in a paradigm shift in the way the Ministry of Defence (MoD) operates. Along with the creation of the CDS, an important enabling reform was the creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA). A large amount of the control that was exercised on the Army, Navy and the Air Force by the Department of Defence (DoD) in the MoD, was transferred to the DMA. Gen Bipin Rawat, on taking over as the CDS, had immediately made his intention clear of increasing jointness among the armed forces through the establishment of Integrated/Joint Theatre Commands.

**Gen Bipin Rawat, on taking over as the CDS, had made his intention clear of increasing jointness among the armed forces through the establishment of Integrated/Joint Theatre Commands.**

### India's Joint Commands: Background

The CDS and the DMA have been mandated by the government to bring about jointness between the services across all domains. The aim is to ensure that resources allotted to the military are utilised in the most optimum manner. The immediate solution that has been found for bringing in jointness among the Services is by creating theatre commands. The CDS has laid out a plan for the creation of theatre commands in a time bound manner. The joint commands to roll out first are the Air Defence Command and the Maritime Command or the Peninsular Command. In addition to these, the proposal is to establish three geography based theatre commands which are likely to be Western, Northern and Eastern Theatre Commands. However, the nomenclature might change. While India moves towards creating theatre commands it will be important to draw lessons from countries like the USA who have operated theatre commands since 1947.

## The USA Path of Theatre Commands

The USA Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) was first established in 1942 to meet operational requirements that emerged during the Second World War for coordination with the British Forces. Because of the experiences of the war, when the USA reorganised its forces in 1947 and 1949, it opted for formalising the JCS structure and creation of theatre

**The JCS functioned on the concept of 'minimum common denominator' i.e., only those advice of the JCS were put forth to the Secretary of Defence on which all the members of the JCS agreed.**

commands. After the war, the USA chose to retain its forces globally and hence opting for theatre commands was the best choice for integrating military effort. More ever it had to segregate resources that it wanted to utilise in different areas. It had adequate resources to utilise in each of these theatre commands.

The JCS of 1947 comprised of the Chiefs of Army, Navy and the Air Force. In 1949 the post of Chairman JCS was created who had no command authority over the other members of the JCS or the Services. The Service Chiefs apart from being part of the JCS retained control of their services. The individual Service was controlled by its specific Military Department, which functioned under a Secretary. The theatre commands functioned under the JCS but the responsibility for organising, equipping and training each component of the theatre command was that of the individual Service Chief. A similar structure is being proposed in India, wherein the theatre commands are being proposed to report to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) whereas the responsibility of equipping, organising and training will remain with the Service Chiefs.

The USA again changed its chain of command of the theatre commands in 1953, the theatre commands started reporting to the Military Departments of individual service. Thus, a single military service headquarters become responsible for an integrated theatre command. This structure was again changed in 1958 and the Military Departments were removed from the chain of command of the theatre commands. The JCS was again brought in and the theatre commands reported to the Secretary of Defence through the JCS. The JCS had its own staff and was responsible for strategic plans and strategic directions for the military. In 1978 the Commandant of Marine Corps also became part of the JCS. The USA thus followed a dual structure, one for operations and the other for organising and training individual Service Components of the theatre commands. India intends to follow a similar dual structure. The JCS functioned on the concept of 'minimum common denominator' i.e., only those advice of the JCS were put forth to the Secretary of Defence on which all the members of the JCS agreed. This led to inadequate advice being put forward, the "tough issues were put under the carpet". These issues were addressed by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.

## Chinks in the Armour

In 1980, the USA mounted Operation 'Eagle Claw' to extricate American hostages from Tehran. The operation was a failure. The main reason identified for the failure was the inability of the Services to function together effectively. The NSA testified before a Senate Committee that individual service interests overshadowed military actions and hampered

joint mission requirements. During the Grenada operations of 1983, units from different Services were not able to communicate efficiently with each other, hampering effective operations. Analyses found that it happened because of the inability of the Services, to formulate and execute joint equipment and communication capability. In October 1983, terrorists bombed Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon. Analysis of the incident revealed that the theatre commander had limited authority over the troops under his command during peacetime to improve their standards, as individual Service were responsible for maintenance and training of individual Service components. This led to the individual Service playing a more direct role even during operations as the Component Commander of each Service often prioritised instructions from his own Service over that of the Theatre Commander. These shortcomings were addressed by the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

**Creating theatre commands in India with the aim of bringing in jointness would be ignoring the lessons that the US defence reforms teaches, which is jointness and integration of Services is not the same as establishing theatre commands.**

## Lessons for India

In India, there is a requirement to improve the existing jointness and integration between the Services in all domains so that it better synergises utilisation of resource. This goal is being sought to be achieved by theatre commands. As per reports in the media, the Theatre Commanders are likely to report directly to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC).

The USA followed its own path of defence reforms based on its requirements. It went on to create theatre commands and JCS structures as early as 1947. However, it realised that even in 1980, which is 33 years after it established theatre commands, it had not been able to achieve jointness or integration between the three services. The USA did not intend to create jointness between the three services by creating theatre commands. Theatre Commands were created because of the requirement of the US military to operate independent militaries in various parts of the globe. Jointness or integration between the Services were enablers for the theatre commands to function more effectively. The USA met its own requirements of jointness and integration by the Goldwater-Nichols Act by making the Chairman JCS and the Theatre Commanders very powerful. It completely isolated the Service Chiefs from operations to meet its requirements of command and control of the theatre commands.

Theatre Commands were not created to ensure jointness; jointness and integration did not happen even 33 years after the creation of theatre commands. Therefore, creating theatre commands in India with the aim of bringing in jointness would be ignoring the lessons that the US defence reforms teaches, which is jointness and integration of Services is not the same as establishing theatre commands. Creating theatre commands and placing them under the COSC in India would be akin to following the path that the USA took in 1959, which led to decisions being taken with a common minimum denominator and tough issues being pushed under the carpet. Theatre command can be the after-effect of jointness and integration between the Services. Jointness cannot be the *raison d'être* for theatre commands. The reasons being propounded in the media, that other countries have theatre commands,

so India should have it is preposterous. Theatre commands should be created, but there are many other milestones that needs to be achieved before it is done and these have been clearly articulated by the government in the responsibilities that it has set for the CDS and DMA.

The theatre commands being proposed in India viz. Air Defence Command, Peninsular Command and the three land based theatre commands are such that in a war none

**The proposed theatre commands of India will neither have the functional capability nor the assets to operate independently in war.**

of them would be able to operate independently of each other. Air Defence Command will always be functional in all operations and will have to work in extreme coordination with all other theatre commands. This is against the principle of singularity of command in a theatre which is one of the important lessons from the USA and which led to the Goldwater-Nichols Act strengthening the mandate of the Theatre Commander over his forces. Each of the theatre commands of India would be woefully deficient in air assets for not only combat but also airlift. In the present stand-off in Ladakh the entire airlift capability of the IAF had to be utilised. The proposed theatre commands of India will neither have the functional capability nor the assets to operate independently in war. Therefore, in India's context, the theatre commands are not likely to bring major changes in operations. Service Chiefs and component commanders would be involved in operations, effectively diluting the command authority of the theatre commander. It is a what not to do lesson from the USA experience. In the Indian context due to the paucity of assets the Service Chiefs cannot be kept out of operations.

India would need to utilise most of its resources in a future war. It presently does not have adequate resources to meet the modernisation requirements for its military. This warrants optimum utilisation of resources. Therefore, capability build-up and military strategy would need to be completely integrated. This can flow from the CDS and the COSC. An IAF squadron, an Army Battalion or a Naval asset would always seek to achieve its task in the way it has trained for it. They are a weapon system for the nation. What is important is that this task for the fighting unit needs to be set with an integrated approach to war and operational objectives. In the present context Indian military during war, would be directed at the national level with the CDS and the COSC completely involved thereby making the nation function as one theatre. Military strategy and military objectives and further going down to operational objectives would need to be set by the CDS and the COSC in synchronisation with national security objectives. The CDS and the COSC would also need to ensure that each Service is capable of achieving the objectives set for it by them. Capability build-up cannot be the sole responsibility of individual Service without having adequate resource for it. The theatre commands that are being proposed do not synchronise with India's current requirements. Reorganising the entire military is a major change and it needs to be ensured that it is a synergistic step which increases the power when combined and not diminishes it.

### **India's Needs are Different**

The two biggest examples of theatre commands are the USA and China. There is a minimal

military threat to the mainland of the USA. Its theatre commands are therefore designed to ensure the protection of US interests across the globe and it has enough assets to earmark them for its various theatres, which were created based on its experiences in the Second

**Against China, entire India will need to function as a single theatre.**

World War. In the case of China, a system similar to theatre commands already existed in the form of Military Regions. It has consolidated and modified its previous system into a new system. Its seven Military Regions have been reorganised into five theatre commands. It has also created various new structures to better synergise its forces. But there is no radical change from what existed before. China's Western Theatre Command with some help from its Central Theatre Command has comparable assets to India. During a war with China, India will have to pitch in all its resources against China's Western Theatre Command. Can India then afford to divide its resources into a theatre command focussed only on China? It can't. Against China, entire India will need to function as a single theatre. India's security needs are different. Since ancient times it has never had hegemonistic ambitions. However, it faces grave threat from Chinese hegemony and Pakistan's belligerence. It needs to consolidate its entire power in one strong punch to hit wherever and whenever required.

In both the USA and China, the theatre commands report directly to the national leadership. In the USA it is the Secretary of Defence similar to India's Defence Minister and in the case of China, it is the Central Military Commission (CMC) which is the highest military body of the Communist Party of China (CPC). This is because the theatre commands are capable of fulfilling their mandate with almost their integral resources and therefore the national objectives for each theatre command are directly set by the national leadership or the political authority. India has a different setup; it needs to find its own solutions to its peculiar security needs which are radically different from the USA and China.

## Conclusion

The creation of CDS and DMA has the potential to completely synergise and reform the way the Indian military functions. There are reports about the creation of theatre commands as a way of achieving jointness between the Services. The USA experience of theatre commands shows that jointness makes the functioning of theatre commands more effective but utilising theatre commands as a means of achieving jointness may not be the correct option. India has the unique opportunity of integrating its military from the planning stage to capability creation and then moving onto operations. Theatre commands are an efficient way of war fighting but enabling joint and integrated environment and capability in terms of resources needs to be achieved before they become effective war instruments. India will need to find its own answers for its national security needs. Its ancient history right from the days of the Mauryan Empire proves that it is quite capable of achieving it.

**India has the unique opportunity of integrating its military from the planning stage to capability creation and then moving onto operations.**

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>Joint History Office; Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Organisational Development of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1942-2013 (April 2013), p.22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp. 29-43

<sup>3</sup> Steven L. Rearden, Council of War: A History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1942-1991, (Washington DC: NDU Press, 2012), p.450.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen J. McInnis, Congressional Research Service, Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defence Reforms and Issues for Congress (June 02, 2016), pp.3, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44474.pdf>. Accessed on May 20, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.5.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Anil Chopra PVSM AVSM VM VSM (Retd).

Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: [shaluchawla@yahoo.com](mailto:shaluchawla@yahoo.com)

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.