

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

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INTRODUCTION

On December 30, 2019, the Government of India 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. Most of the routine decisions of the military including revenue procurements are now taken by 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.

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

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aim is to ensure optimum utilisation of resources allotted to the military. 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 theatre commands based on geography, which are likely to be Western, Northern and Eastern Theatre Commands. The nomenclature may change. The Indian Air Force has stated that it does not have sufficient assets for distribution among the various theatre commands. It has rightly put forth its apprehensions on the proposed structures, as most of its assets have multiple roles and tying them to only one role will be gross underutilisation of their potential. During war, air assets need to be continuously utilised for operations to derive the maximum benefit from their capability. An air asset not being utilised and on the ground during war would be underutilisation of a national asset. The proposed theatre commands appear to adversely affect the capability of the IAF to fully exploit its potential. The structure of theatre commands should synergise the capabilities of the three Services and integrate them into a powerful punch. 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 World War II 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 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. Moreover 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 was comprised of the Chiefs of Army, Navy and the Air Force. Their task was to “formulate strategic plans, to assign logistic responsibilities to the Services in support thereof, to integrate the military programs, to make recommendations for integration of the military budget, and to provide for the strategic direction of the United States military forces.”¹ 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 JCS was designated as the principal military advisor to the President, the Secretary of Defence and the National Security Council. 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.² A similar structure is being proposed in India, wherein the theatre commands are to report to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) headed by the CDS, 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 Services. Thus, a single military service headquarters, under its secretary, becomes 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.³ In 1978 the Commandant of Marine Corps also became part of the JCS. Thus, the USA 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

1. 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. 16.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-43.

the concept of 'minimum common denominator', i.e., only that advice of the JCS was 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".⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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 Services 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.⁷ These shortcomings were addressed by the Goldwater-Nichols Act.

GOLDWATER-NICHOLS ACT OF 1986

A few of the objectives that the Act sought to achieve are as follows:⁸

- Clearly outline the chain of command of the commanders of the

4. Steven L. Rearden, *Council of War: A History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1942-1991* (Washington, D.C.: NDU Press, 2012), p. 450.

5. Kathleen J. McInnis, Congressional Research Service, *Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defence Reforms and Issues for Congress*, June 2, 2016, p. 3, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44474.pdf>. Accessed on May 20, 2021.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

unified commands, from them to Secretary of Defence and then to the President.

- Completely isolate the Service Chiefs from the chain of command for military operations.
- Responsibility for mission accomplishment was to be of the commander of the unified commands. His authority was to be correspondingly increased to enable him to fulfil his responsibility.
- Elevate the Chairman, JCS above the other Service Chiefs in the JCS and make him the single point of military advice to the Secretary of Defence and the President.
- Separate budget proposals for activities of each unified combatant command were to be earmarked in the annual budget of the Department of Defence.⁹

In the run-up to the Act, David Jones, Chairman, JCS had testified: "It is not sufficient to just have resources, dollars and weapon systems; we must also have an organization which will allow us to develop the proper strategy, necessary planning, and the full warfighting capability. ... We do not have an adequate organizational structure today."¹⁰ It was a telling comment by the Chairman, JCS, on jointness and integration between various components of the US military, 37 years after the establishment of unified combatant commands. The primary objective of the Goldwater-Nichols Act was to improve interoperability and jointness between the various components of the military.

LESSONS FOR INDIA

India needs to improve the existing jointness and integration between the Services in all domains so that it better synergises utilisation of resources. This goal is being sought to be achieved by theatre commands. According to media reports, 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

9. US Congress Legislation, 99th Congress H. R. 3622, Summary, "Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganisation Act of 1986", at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/house-bill/3622>. Accessed on August 13, 2021.

10. Kathleen J. McInnis, n. 5, p. 6.

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 the US military needed 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. The USA did not have a shortage of resources. It earmarked separate budgets for each unified combatant command, something that India can ill afford to do. India needs to integrate its defence spending and capability creation in order to prevent duplication of effort and wastage of precious national resources.

Theatre Commands were not created to ensure jointness; jointness and integration did not happen even 37 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 are preposterous. Theatre commands should be created, but there are many other milestones that need 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, namely, Air Defence Command, Peninsular Command and the three land-based theatre commands are such that in a war none 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 of 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 Services without having adequate resources 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 US and China. There is a minimal conventional military threat to the mainland of the US. 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 World War II. 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 focused 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 threats 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 US and China, the theatre commands report directly to the national leadership. In the US 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 set-up; it needs to find its own solutions to its peculiar security needs which are radically different from the US and China.

CONCLUSION

The creation of CDS and DMA has the potential to completely synergise and reform the way the Indian military functions. There is an imperative requirement to improve integration and jointness between the three arms of the military, both for better utilisation of resources and for enhancing their effectiveness in facing present and future security challenges. There are reports about the creation of theatre commands as a way of achieving jointness between the Services. The US experience of theatre commands shows that jointness and integration between the Services is important to make 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 on to operations. Theatre commands are an efficient way of warfighting 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.