

INTEGRATED THEATRE COMMAND: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FIELD

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“The only thing harder than getting a new idea into the military mind is to get the old one out.”

– Sir B.H. Liddell Hart

INTRODUCTION

The central narrative of the three services, Army, Navy and the Air Force working in tandem with a synergistic approach has been affected in the recent past over the role of the Air Force as a support arm to the Army. The idea of a support arm or airborne artillery has been almost unanimously opposed by veterans of the three Services and researchers at think tanks. Also, eminent defence experts in the media are not very comfortable with the logic and remain circumspect about this narrative.

Meanwhile, a lot of buzz has been generated by the idea of theatre commands. Several questions become pertinent in this context ... Does India require its geographical boundaries to be divided into theatres, like the US and China have done? Why are all high-ranking senior veterans across the three services chary of the idea of theatrisation? Isn't it true that this issue requires in-depth brainstorming sessions and discussions at the formation and field level? Dividing the country into geographic theatres is not only impractical considering our threats, but also has more of a strategic implication than a tactical one. The latter, however, has unfortunately taken

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primacy in the recent discourse. The key hurdles to a seamless transition to proposed theatrical command in the Indian setting are primarily three fundamental issues: an incorrect grasp of doctrinal precepts, understanding jointness in the proper perspective, and creating the foundation of theatre structure on a pro-rata basis.

INDIVISIBILITY OF AIR POWER

The Indian Air Force, since the beginning, has not been very convinced with the idea of the creation of multiple theatres within Indian geographical limits. One of the reasons for it is the indivisibility of air power. This is the moot point and concern of IAF, which somehow has not been accepted by land forces and the Indian Navy to some extent. After all, theatres should not be created on an incorrect understanding of the basics of air power. In fact, in contemporary conflict situations, all mature military forces are increasingly adhering to the concept of joint operations where the three domains of land, maritime and air are optimally combined to create the required effect for meeting an overall military objective. Therefore, it is essential to align land, air and maritime combat capabilities for a joint military strategy. Air power has the capability to ensure that the desired end-state is achieved with the minimum expenditure of resources. This, in turn, ensures that each activity within the detailed spectrum of a chosen strategy would contribute directly to achieving the desired end-state.¹ Somehow, the role of Air Force and air power has not been factored in, keeping its basic principles and characteristics in consideration.

Air campaigns can be executed against different target systems simultaneously. Air power has an inherent capability to provide both

1. **Sanu Kainikara.** Excerpts from the book “The Bolt from The Blue Air Power in the Cycle of Strategies”, p. 11, at <https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/AP27-The-Bolt-From-the-Blue.pdf>. Accessed on August 16, 2021.

kinetic and non-kinetic options with pinpoint accuracy. Air power can directly influence outcomes and activities of the surface forces and can simultaneously produce physical as well as psychological shock.² Thus, it is time that lethality and characteristics of air power are revisited by the leadership before making any final

decisions on models of theatre command in the Indian context. In the race to establish theatre commands, a well-thought and prudent decision about the formulation of theatres is essential. Otherwise, air power would be reduced to a support function for land/maritime power.

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JOINTNESS AND INTEGRATED OPERATIONS

Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) had issued a joint doctrine in 2017 to ensure more synergy and integration at all levels for effective joint operations. HQ Andaman Nicobar Command and HQ IDS have been working for this objective. However, the real sense of jointness and integration has unfortunately not gone to the last mile. The joint doctrine defines jointness as:

Jointness implies or denotes possessing an optimised capability to engage in Joint War-Fighting and is not limited to just Joint-War Fighting (Joint Operations). It needs to be clearly understood and discerned that Jointness is a 'Concept', whereas Joint operations are evolutions. Joint operations and single-Service operations are subsets of the larger whole of 'conceptual Jointness'. Cooperative centralised planning enables the appropriate concentration of forces, with the right mix at the right time and place.³

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2. **Anil Chopra**, "India and its Air Power: Transformational Challenges: Transformational Challenges", *CLAWS Journal*, September 2019, New Delhi; and part of article "**Evolving Trends in Aerial Combat**", at <https://airpowerasia.com/2020/05/05/evolving-trends-in-aerial-combat/> Accessed on August 16, 2021.
 3. Section I, "Understanding Integration and Jointness", from the Joint Doctrine Indian Armed Forces, New Delhi, p. 39, at https://www.ids.nic.in/IDSAdmin/upload_images/doctrine/JointDoctrineIndianArmedForces2017.pdf. Accessed on August 17, 2021.

Jointness must be seen and worked at the planning level where all teething issues, constraints and respective fortes can be leveraged to meet the operational goals. The military commanders and top leadership of the Services have been emphasising jointness at all levels.

The joint doctrine also states that integration is

The more common use of the term 'Integration' in contemporary Military matters is about the integration of 'processes' across all operational domains of land, air, maritime, cyberspace and aerospace, towards optimisation of costs and enhancing readiness. Integration is embodied across all functions; Operations, Intelligence, Technology

Management, Perspective Plans, Logistics, Human Resources Development (HRD). It does not imply physical integration. Such embodiment enables common understanding leading to efficient and optimised responses.⁴

It is understood that the core issue of jointness and integrated operations were considered as the lynchpin of creating theatre commands in India to facilitate integrated planning and coordinated application in military warfare. However, it is not only the creation of an integrated structure that will enable jointness amongst the three services. Without a doubt and any discussions on jointness must begin at the grassroots level, where all stakeholders speak the same language to achieve the common objective effectively. Jointness must be seen and worked at the planning level where all teething issues, constraints and respective fortes can be leveraged to meet the operational goals. The military commanders and top leadership of the Services have been emphasising jointness at all levels. Unfortunately, the same has not percolated down to the final guy in the field. The field players remain riveted to their affiliations, operating procedures and service-specific concerns, ethics and beliefs.

Creating structures and renaming organisations may not be sufficient to inculcate jointness. Had this been the case, then Army and Navy Headquarters that were renamed Integrated HQs of MoD many years should

4. Ibid., p. 40.

have been truly integrated. Is it true that these headquarters are now truly merged with the Ministry of Defense? True integration and cohesion must occur in regular business in order to be prepared to conduct combined operations during times of war and conflict. This is most likely why the IAF has not yet embraced the Integrated Headquarters of the Ministry of Defense language.

Almost all major countries like the US, the UK, Russia and France work on a theatre command concept. Most of these theatres are created on its global outlook and part of its expeditionary character, expansionist view and capabilities to meet them. China is the newest country to embrace the concept of theatre.

MILITARY THEATRE: GLOBAL STRATEGIC CONNOTATIONS

Another concern is how the concept of theatre is understood in the Indian context. In military parlance, the term theatre has a very emphatic and significant connotation that is strategic in nature. The Oxford dictionary defines *theatre* of war as “the entire land, sea and air areas that are or may become involved directly in war operations”.⁵ Primarily, World War I witnessed a singular European theatre. However, many theatres and fronts emerged during World War II as the battles were fought across the continents. Theatres such as Middle East, Africa and Pacific-Asian with vast geographical limits had multiple fronts such as Eastern Front, Western Front, Nordic Front, etc. These theatres referred to the geographical limits of the battle and all the deployments of the army, navy and air force in a fused manner within its boundaries. Theatres and fronts were largely led by the Army in the past. This has changed with officers from specific services taking over the command depending on the nature of the operations. Almost all major countries like the US, the UK, Russia and France work on a theatre command concept. Most of these theatres are created on its global outlook and part of its expeditionary character, expansionist view and capabilities

5. Priyanka Waghmare, “Exercise ZAPAD 2021: What Are Military Theatre Commands?”, at <https://testbook.com/current-affairs/exercise-zapad-2021/>. Accessed on September 25, 2021.

It is noted that theatres in the United States are not restricted to their legitimate boundaries, and are spread all over the world. These theatres are capable of undertaking prolonged missions and operations from any part of the world.

to meet them. China is the newest country to embrace the concept of theatre, aspires to a more significant position in the world.⁶ It would be apt to learn about a few of them.

United States Unified Combatant Command

The USA is a superpower with global hegemony and massive assets to meet and execute any kind of military campaigns and operations. A unified combatant command (CCMD) is a joint military command of the United States Department of Defence. It comprises units from two or more service branches of the US Armed Forces and conducts broad and continuing missions.⁷ It has 11 joint military theatre commands out of which 7 are geographically defined across the entire globe for providing effective command and control of all US military forces, regardless of branch of service, during peace or wartime. Four are designated as functional commands on an operational basis like power projection, special and transport operations and cyber security. The present system of unified commands in the US military emerged during World War II, with the establishment of geographic theatres of operation composed of forces from multiple service branches that reported to a single commander who was supported by a joint staff.⁸

Every command has a strategic significance with independent assets permanently attached to it. It is noted that theatres in the United States are not restricted to their legitimate boundaries, and are spread all over

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6. Snehes Alex Philip, "What are Military Theatre Commands and Why does India want to Switch to Them", The Print, July 6, 2021, at <https://theprint.in/defence/what-are-military-theatre-commands-and-why-does-india-want-to-switch-to-them/690487/>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.
 7. *Joint Pub 1*, p. GL-11. USA Military Doctrine, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unified_combatant_command. Accessed on August 26, 2021.
 8. JCS (1985), p. 1, USA Military Doctrine, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unified_combatant_command and https://infogalactic.com/info/Unified_Combatant_Command. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

the world. These theatres are capable of undertaking prolonged missions and operations from any part of the world. The assets, human resources, communication, training, etc., are dedicated to their respective theatres. All the services, including the US Marine Corps, are truly integrated, with well-defined procedures and SOPs for the forces to act upon.

Fig. 1: Area of Responsibility of United States Unified Combatant Command HQs



Source: Wikipedia

Russia: Russia has always leveraged its military as an instrument of power, especially when using coercion and manipulation against its neighbours to meet its national objectives.⁹ Putin's 2014 revised Military Doctrine underlined the reduced probability of Russia facing large-scale attacks, instead referring to 'unresolved regional conflicts'.¹⁰ Russia orchestrated military planning by uniting the operational art and military doctrine at the operational level. It ensured the deployment of forces and conduct of the war by drawing

9. Michael Kofman, "Drivers of Russian Grand Strategy," blog on Russian Military Analysis, May 1, 2019, at <https://merics.org/en/report/learning-russia-how-china-used-russian-models-and-experiences-modernize-pla>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

10. Jolanta Darczewska, "The Devil Is In The Details Information Warfare in the Light of Russia's Military Doctrine", Point of View 05/2015, Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw Poland, at <https://merics.org/en/report/learning-russia-how-china-used-russian-models-and-experiences-modernize-pla>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

instructions from the political leadership, enshrined in the military strategy and the tenets of principles regarding nature of war laid down within the military doctrine.¹¹ It emphasised the primary requirement of integrating all organs of the Soviet military at the front, army and corps levels in order to conduct joint operations and achieve objectives both at the operational and strategic levels. Russians consider that military operations below divisional level are tactical battles incorporating combined arms, joint fires and missiles in the conduct of battles and counterattacks,¹² which, unfortunately, India lacks.

The erstwhile six Military Districts (MDs) were reorganised into four MDs, as per geographical territories, namely, the Eastern, the Western, the Central and the Southern Districts as the significant change. Initially, these MDs were called Joint Strategic Commands (JSCs).¹³ After due contemplation, Russian MoD retained the nomenclature of MD to be used in peacetime and be termed as 'JSC' only during wartime or conflict to enable the concept of 'to decentralise command and delegate *control*'.¹⁴ However, operational control is vested with the MDs. Each MD has a control centre that directs land, maritime and air forces in its AOR for closer coordination. This arrangement has drastically shortened the command chain and OODA loop. They do not have to fall back on Moscow anymore.¹⁵ These JSCs control all units except nuclear and strategic assets, like the Strategic Rocket Forces, airborne units

11. Edward J. Felker, "Russian View of Military Doctrine", in *Oz Revisited: Russian Military Doctrinal Reform in Light of Their Analysis of Desert Storm* (Alabama: Air University Press, 1995), p. 8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep139347https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia> and <https://kutch2kibithu.com/comparing-russian-and-chinese-military-reforms/>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.
12. Mandip Singh, "Learning from Russia: Comparing Russian and Chinese Military Reforms", at <https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia> and <https://kutch2kibithu.com/comparing-russian-and-chinese-military-reforms/>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.
13. M. Barabanov (ed.), *Russia's New Army*, Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2011, p. 27, at <https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.
14. Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, *The Russian Way of War: Force Structure, Tactics, and Modernization of The Russian Ground Forces* (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2016), p. 28, at <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Hot%20Spots/Documents/Russia/2017-07-The-Russian-Way-of-War-Grau-Bartles.pdf> at <https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.
15. Martin Russell, "Russia's Armed Forces: Reforms and Challenges", Report to European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2015, at <https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

and the Intelligence Directorate and Special Forces units, which are directly under the General Staff at Moscow.¹⁶

Fig. 2: Area of Responsibility of Russian Military Districts¹⁷



Source: Graphics.

China: China, too, reorganised its defence 2015 along the same lines as the Russian model of JSC. The military reforms replaced the system of Military regions (MRs) with five new Military Theatre Commands (MTCs). “The principle of a newly implemented structure, during which the CMC takes charge of the general military administration, theatre commands specialise in combat and therefore the different military branches pursue their development. This must be resolutely observed.” President Xi said this while handing over the banners to the first set of theatre commanders at

16. Nick de Larrinaga, “Return of the Bear: Russian Ground Forces Modernisation”, *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, at https://www.janes.com/images/assets/643/58643/Return_of_the_bear_Russian_Ground_Forces_modernisation.pdf at <https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

17. GRAPHICS. Military Exercises in Russia, at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/military-exercises-russia>

China has revitalised its military resources theatre-wise with an expansionist approach and outlook. Due to the mass production of military assets, China is capable of organising dedicated resources per theatre.

an impressive ceremony in Beijing in 2016.¹⁸ Reforms were also focused on the aspiration to increase the PLA's ability to carry out joint operations on a modern, high-tech battlefield. The military reforms proposed by Xi since he became Commander-in-Chief have included modernisation

initiatives to reorganise the command system, force structure, education and training.¹⁹ China has revitalised its military resources theatre-wise with an expansionist approach and outlook. Due to the mass production of military assets, China is capable of organising dedicated resources per theatre. China's approach to military theaterisation is strategic as well. China is almost thrice as compared to India in landmass. China has disturbed relations with nearly all its neighbours. Thus, China needs a dedicated command and control for each geographical direction. Hence, the efficacy of theatre commands for China is entirely justified. The added benefit with China is the availability of Human resources and numerical advantage in all its machines and equipment. Unlike India, China has efficiently managed its arms production demand and supply, thus equipping its theatres adequately. In terms of strategic planning, the five MTCs are no longer positioned just for regional defence, but also 'head-on and proactive defence', consistent with Zhang Tao, a military commentator in the PLA, suggests that they keep the potential to launch preemptive operations across the immediate frontiers opposite their respective areas of responsibility.²⁰

18. "China's Military Regrouped into Five PLA Theater Commands", *Xinhua*, February 1, 2016, at <https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

19. Kevin McCauley, "PLA Joint Operations Developments and Military Reform", Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, vol. 14, no. 7 (April 9, 2014): pp. 1-2, at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53468d7e4.html>. Accessed on February 28, 2020 at <https://merics.org/en/report/learning-russia-how-china-used-russian-models-and-experiences-modernize-pla>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

20. Zhang Tao, "Considerations for Replacing Military Area Commands with Theatre Commands", *China Military Online*, March 2, 2016, at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/pla-daily-commentary/2016-02/03/content_6888459.htm<https://idsa.in/jds/14-4-2020-learning-from-russia>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

Fig. 3: Area of Responsibility of Theatre Command HQs of China



Source: researchgate.net

ARE WE GOING WRONG?

The ongoing discussions and proposed plan of having five theatres in India appear to be more of an operational demarcation of boundaries with tactical leaning. The essence of jointness and synergistic operations in a strategic environment is missing in the thought process, which requires a deeper and more professional relook at the state of affairs. The theatre commands concept may work well with countries like the US and China primarily because they are self-reliant. However, the case with India is different. India should not get obsessed with the structures of the US and China and follow it blindly, just because

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it has a dedicated Chief of Defence Staff today. The myth of jointness and integration through the creation of hollow structures could cost the Armed Forces in terms of lack of operational preparedness and trust deficit in peacetime activities, apart from a lack of willingness to adapt

the best practices amongst the three services.

One can argue that India does not have an expansionist outlook. However, the Indian Armed Forces have been involved in various expeditionary tasks, especially for HADR, and to resolve specific issues raised out of contingencies. When called upon, the Indian armed forces have always triumphed in such expeditionary missions. Be it Op *Pawan* in Sri Lanka, Op Cactus in the Maldives, evacuation of Indian Diaspora from war-torn Yemen in 2015 under Op *Rahat* and from Kabul just a few days back. Thus, making a theatre command is justified for accomplishing such synergistic operations. However, it must be kept in mind that successful operations like these are only possible with the complete wherewithal of resources such as aeroplanes and personnel. In the theatre concept the assets, especially air power, will eventually get earmarked per theatre. Therefore, this may not yield the much-hyped dividend if resources are shared as per the proposed set-up.

Another justification for the establishment of three commands, namely land, air and maritime, is that it is repackaging the same old wine. Such thinking propagates the same in accordance with the pro-rata concept, which is highly detrimental. The three Services are probably finding difficulty in repositioning two and three-star officers in the overall plan of theaterisation. It appears that the fight is more on the Human Resources allocation, chain of command, under command concept, promotional avenues rather than joint planning, worthy common doctrine, execution, sharing of resources, training of personnel, maintenance of best practices, etc. Parting of resources,

traditions, etc., would be extremely difficult unless a realistic and holistic professional approach is adopted. The decision-makers are required to have a holistic vision of the capability of India towards this step in the present state. It is an arduous task to carry out introspection and find answers to the following concerns than it is to ponder the pro-rata distribution of *Who, How* and *How Many*.

- Does the Indian military have the mandate to look beyond immediate neighbours to conceive the idea of strategic theatre command HQs?
- Does the Indian military expect any external threat that would necessitate the construction of a theatre?
- Does India have such a geographical area to defend that it requires five theatre commands?
- Is theaterisation needed in the Indian scenario, and is India economically sound to explore this venture?
- Does India have an excellent integrated capacity build-up for each theatre to be self-sufficient?
- Are the existing structures of 17 Command HQs of the respective Service not adequate to handle two nuclear-powered adversaries?
- Is it not that jointness and integration of human resources, SOPs, joint planning, and training are required more at the field level than at the two or three-star hierarchy?
- Is it not that the efficacy of synergy is more personality based rather than working under SOPs acceptable to all, with institutions in place?
- Can't the challenges of jointness, common planning, and understanding of other services be improved upon by strengthening dedicated joint organisations such as Adv HQs, TACs, GLOs, MAO, training at basic stages for both officers and other ranks, implementing SOPs like JSSG, sharing communication infrastructures and best practices, and so forth?
- Is the concept of theaterisation a Chinese invention, and India must emulate it in order to stay current?
- Can air power ever function efficiently with the divisibility of resources?

There is a requirement to review each service's overall structure as many tentacles, procedures and traditions must be shed or given a fresh look, all while keeping abreast with the present technological advancements in military affairs.

- Aren't the essential characteristics of airpower getting defeated?
- Does India have a worthy joint doctrine capable of fighting a war in the integrated theatre commands?

STRENGTHENING THE PRESENT STRUCTURE

The torchbearers of theatre command architecture in the Indian scenario may take a tactical pause and find answers to the question: why do we require it in the first instance itself? The three services are carrying out their mandated roles and tasks with professionalism. However, with time, there is a requirement to review each service's overall structure as many tentacles, procedures and traditions must be shed or given a fresh look, all while keeping abreast with the present technological advancements in military affairs.

Certain legacy and lengthier procedures, rules and regulations must be reviewed. Leaner, meaner and more technologically oriented forces are the order of the day. At the same time, there are various organisations and ideologies with the outlook of yester years that still hold relevance and should be revived with a newer and wholesome approach. For example, Air Force organisations like Advance HQ collocated with Army Command HQ, TAC HQs with Army Corps HQ, and Maritime Air Operation HQ collocated with Naval Command HQ is a classical organisation for jointmanship. Despite various constraints, these formations are doing their bit to build up joint planning, coordination and joint operations. Similarly, the Army and Navy can also pitch in towards creating such organisations with the Air Force for furthering jointmanship in a true sense. There is a vast scope of inter-service coordination between the air defence elements of the three services to work cooperatively and make the Indian skies much safer. Still, impetus on such

joint efforts has never been seen on the field in the true sense.

There can't be a better platform than Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) Wellington, where all the three services learn jointness in actual 'purple' colour and become the selected future leadership of the respective services. But unfortunately, the DSSC

has not been able to adopt a standard staff correspondence template at the college itself. A three-star Army General always commands DSSC. Air Force and Naval leadership are not considered for command positions at this internationally renowned university.

At present, the political and military leaderships may reconsider the idea of establishing a theatre based organisation for India. Rather than building a theatre command architecture, a concerted effort to reinforce the current system through various changes may yield better and bolder results. Truly joint structures should commence at the training level to instil jointmanship and then see the light of the day subsequently.

WHAT IF THEATRE COMMAND IS INEVITABLE?

Given the current ground situation, one can expect a delay in the finalisation of the theatres. The concerns raised above are pertinent to find an appropriate solution to make the foundation strong if the Indian Integrated Theatre command formation is inevitable. However, few of the suggestions may catch the attention of theatre architects in the process of brainstorming sessions in the future.

- **Working Group.** The three service HQs have made the best-suited proposal that preserves the basic structure adequately and submitted it to the CDS. However, this methodology is more of the joined working group than the Joint one. Hence, the current issue of jointmanship and integration remains a crucial area of concern. The working group of three

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services must thrash out their Service-specific hindrances and develop a practical theaterisation concept as a single project. A word of caution is that fitting the respective theatre models into a joint model will be disastrous, mainly because of pro-rata and inter-se seniority. One may argue for a fair share for each service in some model of ratio, but this frequently takes precedence over the merit of the matter. At the end of the day, the proposed structures somehow revolve around which service gets how many two- or three-star appointments.

- **Overcoming “Joined-ness”.** Altering the building with a strong foundation will have tremendous difficulty in erecting structures over it. Similarly, theatre command cannot be built by joining the existing service-specific structures grouted to the core. Therefore, rather than fiddling with the existing service-specific command structures, it will be a noble idea to start afresh with a solid foundation and integrate at the grass root level.
- **Trial Template.** It would be prudent to make a working template inclusive of all operational, logistical and administrative responsibilities functioning on the ground and observe it for two years commencing from March 1, 2022. The shortcomings and lacunae discovered could then be addressed for raising other theatres. This template would have all resources percolating down from theatre commanders to the last man in the field. All resources of man and machine may be allocated to the theatre. Forming it in central India would be the most viable option as it would not immediately interfere in the current Op preparedness of the three services. It is proposed that this theatre can be created as a trial template to iron out the teething issues. The trial period with defined objectives may be kept to a minimum of two years, extendable to another year for learning at the tactical, operational and strategic levels. This theatre will be employed for real-time HADR operations to validate the tri-services synergy. Drawing lessons from this template could be implemented in the final creation of theatre commands across India w.e.f. January 1, 2025.

- **Merging of Service Specific Command HQs.** The next two years may be dedicated to drawing a proficient structure where the emphasis should remain on shedding the non-essential tentacles at Command HQs. There is an ample area where roles and tasks can be easily clubbed, including human resources and make the organisation thinner. It will enable ease in the dissolution of the Command structure into the futuristic theatre command architecture. It would be futile to raise a theatre command while retaining the existing service-specific 17 Command HQs on the insignificant grounds of raise, train and sustain.
- **Joint Training at Field Level.** No matter what argument is given, joint training at the field level for all ranks, including officers, is the prerequisite of an integrated environment in the true sense. It will enable personnel at all levels to understand each other's constraints, procedures, logic, beliefs to adapt to the best practice for successful joint operations. The top leadership has always emphasised inculcating joint planning and synergy; however, the obstacle of constant and persistent training is the most significant lacunae observed at the field level, which often leads to tactical and operational loopholes.
- **Allocation of Resources.** All three services allocate resources primarily at the command level. The template of sharing poverty may not hold ground in transforming to the theatre concept. Tri services synergistic effort is required to make at least one theatre full-fledged in all respects. Basing the Op plans on sharing resources during war or conflict is the mark of fissured planning ab initio. Constructing a gigantic military structure of strategic significance with pooled resources would be a

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significant mistake that India cannot afford. Raising theatres is not an end in itself, but its sustenance and op effectiveness is.

- **Joint Commissioning/ Enrolment.** The present set-up of joint training at NDA and after that trifurcation into the respective services has not been able to indoctrinate the much-wanted jointmanship in the overall context. It would be a bold and firm call to institutionalise the mechanism of joint commissioning for officers and common enrolment for other ranks in the Indian Defence Forces. The feeling of oneness comes automatically by wearing the same uniform, and the prime blockade towards jointmanship gets shed easily. Training on specialisation, cross-training and assignments can be provided to the individuals further.
- **Cross-Training/Cross-Pollination.** One of the leading shortcomings in the present time is being at a separate datum, thus being unable to read and understand each other's language. It further gets complicated due to the inherent instructions and operating procedures. Thus, it is essential to cross-train each other's systems and produce standard and effective SOPs acceptable to all.
- **Matching Pace with Technology and Mindset.** The term Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) denotes significant, interconnected changes in strategies, doctrines, equipment, organisation and structures that aim to fundamentally alter a nation's approach to warfare.²¹ The technological revolution in military affairs has progressively become the need for an effective land, air and maritime power. However, the present outlook of three services towards acceptance of technological mindset is at variance, and hence many of the projects, procurements have not seen the light of the day. A striking example is a case of AFNET moving far ahead than Trigun of the Navy and Akashteer of the Army which are not yet fully functional. It is pertinent that integration of communication, Air Defence, Intelligence, accounting, logistics support could be the first fields that

21. Special Report on "The Revolution in Military Affairs", NATO Parliamentary Assembly Science and Technology Committee by Lothar Brugger, General Rapporteur, November 1998, at <https://merics.org/en/report/learning-russia-how-china-used-russian-models-and-experiences-modernize-pla>. Accessed on August 26, 2021.

may be strengthened as there is no dearth of infrastructure or trained human resources available with each Service in these areas. Indifferent mindset, apprehensions to acceptance of others' views and different levels of training in understanding technological datum are the causes of non-integration of resources at the field level. The non-ratification and non-implementation of JSSG 08 to date is a striking example in hand.

- **Appraisal Chain.** There is no end to individual aspirations, and career progression is one of the prevalent fears around integration. The transition from existing career progression schemes to the common career progression cannot be expected to be easy. The three Services will have to pay adequate attention to HR aspirations and meet a balanced end. At present, every Service has a different method of assessment and career progression schemes that are not only incongruous but detrimental for theatre concepts.
- **Promotion Methodology.** One of the most significant hiccups in the common jointness is the promotional avenues for the officers of each service. All officers commissioned in the armed forces go through the same selection procedure of the Services Selection Board (SSB). However, the promotion policy of each service is different, which results in unavoidable undercurrents. The three services have had the importance of certain branches such as Infantry, Armoured Corps, Flying branch, Executive branch, etc., taking a significant chunk of tenantry the higher and senior leadership appointments. The step-motherly approach to job aspirations beginning in the early stages of training results in many representations in the judicial system. In most of these cases, the representing officers have been victorious. The assessment marks of the three services are different, whereas officers of one service rarely get less than 9, for others 7.5 is considered exceptional. This kind of disparity makes officers reluctant to be enmeshed in another system. The architects of theatre command will have to bring the assessment procedure at the same datum before stepping into the joint structure. The senior leadership

Due to the peculiar nature of the promotion scheme, a well-trained lot of armed forces officers remain underutilised who could be effectively and gainfully harnessed for diplomatic and administrative assignments in the course of nation-building.

will have to take a holistic approach and clarion call on the meritorious officers left out in one service and a mediocre officer making the cut in other services. Every officer needs to be considered at the same level, except those who are professionally weaker and the ones involved in disciplinary cases.

- **Lateral Exit/Entry Scheme.** The present government has emphasised the participation of the commoner in governance. At present, ten professionals have been laterally inducted into the civil services at the Joint Secretary level. Various ministries, especially the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD), have a shortage of officers in their cadre. Due to the peculiar nature of the promotion scheme, a well-trained lot of armed forces officers remain underutilised who could be effectively and gainfully harnessed for diplomatic and administrative assignments in the course of nation-building. Formation of theatre command would unavoidably necessitate a reduction in the Armed Forces personnel from field level to three-star officers. It would be a viable option to explore the possibility of exiting officers and inducting them into the governance system at various levels starting from the Joint Director level and upwards. Lateral entry into the paramilitary forces, police services, ministries, commissions, state governance, academia, think tanks, etc., will help the Services resolve insurmountable HR issues. In the bargain, it will be a complete win-win situation for both, the Services and the Government of India.

HOW MANY THEATRES?

Keeping the strategic significance of theatres in mind and the prevailing threat perception based on the geographical dispensation, India can be best divided into three to four theatres. The exact demarcation of geographical

limits will be dictated by reviewing the allocation of resources and the availability of the corresponding infrastructure on the ground. However, the proposed theatres with generic geographical bounds mentioned below would suffice to meet India's aspiration in this field.

- **Western Theatre (Pakistan Centric).** The general geographical demarcation could be from Kashmir Valley down south till south Gujarat. The exact areas will be based on the troop concentration in the peacetime, wartime men and material deployment, locations of airbases, etc. This AoR will be primarily Pakistan-centric, and deployment of military assets of the Army and Air Force will need to be reviewed; however, a substantial revamp of this theatre may not be necessary. This theatre needs to be commanded by an Air Force or Army three-star officer.
- **Eastern Theatre (China Centric).** The general geographical demarcation could be from Ladakh Sector from Turtuk passing through Siachen to Eastern Ladakh, moving further eastwards to the North Eastern States all along the Himalayas. This theatre's sphere of duty will be substantially larger than the current command structures. The AoR will encompass the inclusion of a multi-variety of equipment for the Army and Air Force. It will demand a massive revamp of resources, infrastructure, and, most importantly, the mindset transformation of the Army and Air Force hierarchy. This theatre also needs to be commanded by an Air Force or Army three-star officer.
- **Peninsular Theatre.** It would encompass the general land mass touching the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal of the Indian peninsula, including

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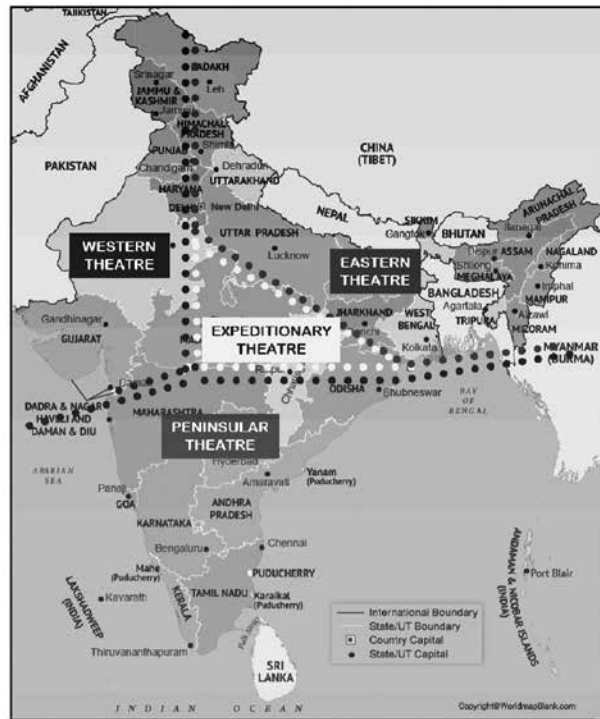
Lakshadweep and Andaman and the Nicobar Islands. Primarily, this theatre will concentrate on the maritime affairs both on the east and west coast of India along with the Indian Ocean Region, but it will be in no way close to the maritime command as hitherto understood. The creation of this theatre will require maritime forces to adapt more to the changes envisaged. The challenges of this theatre will be in terms of an enhanced area of responsibility along with essential Air and Maritime operations in the high seas and land operations in the coastal and mainland AoR. This theatre needs to be commanded by a three-star officer from the three services in rotation.

- **Expeditionary Theatre (Additional Role of HADR).** As recommended to be the trial template, the central part of India could be converted to the Expeditionary Theatre during requirement and function as the HADR theatre for India. The AoR of this command has been deliberately kept at the hinterland. The AoR depicted in the proposed map is small in size. It can be extended further south and eastwards as per the resources (men and material) allocated for the trial. Also, this trial template will not affect the operational capability of the armed forces if any external skirmishes arise at the IB, LAC or LOC during the trial period. This theatre is to be commanded by a three-star officer from three services in rotation.

AIR DEFENCE COMMAND

The concept of AD command is best avoided in an Indian scenario with the availability of fighter aircraft, SAMs, sensors, etc. The existing architecture of Air Defence set up in the country is time tested and effective. It is better to strengthen the AD set up with more robust AD assets rather than pooling all resources pan India into one integral AD command. The issues related to interoperability, integration and commonality of training must be overcome technologically by the reconciliation of service philosophies and common training. Air defence is the only tentacle of air warfare that is permanently active. It is the never-ending task of 24x7x365. Air Defence is always superimposed on all kinds of operations, be it on land, air or sea.

Fig. 4: Proposed Theatre Commands of India with Generic Demarcation



Source: Author

The creation of AD command will eventually have to deal and coordinate with all theatre commands during both peacetime and wartime.

It will be foolhardy to create a structure with almost negligible resources attached to it. At present, the air defence resources across three services are nowhere the actual requirement for protection of the entire country except for the C&R capability of IAF, which has grown much bigger and faster. The decision to form the integrated Air Defence Command has grave operational risks. Its consequences could lead to an irreversible fracture of the integrity of the IAF's air operations. It is a force-fit that is an unworkable solution to an ill-defined problem. Formation of the ADC would not only go against the operational, organisational and doctrinal wisdom but would

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also needlessly add a superfluous organisation with its attendant costs and going against one of the key objectives of integration.²² Hence, let the existing system of being affiliated to the respective commands continue.

Much emphasis should be on the further enhancement of communication, network centricity and dedicated AD resources.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative to create a red cell in each Service to provide a counter-argument of the idea of theaterisation and carry out a series of exhaustive wargaming at all levels to validate the necessity of structures like theatre command with hardly any resources. All stakeholders must remember that airpower offers strategic flexibility in terms of the ability to reconfigure for different kinds of missions quickly.²³ The predominant air operations have the capability of power projection at far distances without endangering their battlespace. Air power also offers the political leadership strategic choices and alternatives for sustainable and easily scalable levels. These characteristics of air power are independent of proposed theatres in the Indian context. As a result, the requirement of truly overcoming the age-old custom of resolving all conflicts pro-rata will have to be abandoned. The case for allocating resources must be made and justified on the grounds of attaining overall military objectives.

Jointness at all levels, starting from *ab-initio* training of both officers and other ranks cadre, is an inescapable necessity towards the actual integration of the three Services. India will be celebrating its 75th year of Independence in

22. Air Marshal SS Soman, "Joint Air Defence Command will lead to sub-optimal utilisation of assets. Not a great idea", The Print, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/joint-air-defence-command-will-lead-to-sub-optimal-utilisation-of-assets-not-a-great-idea/439414/>. Accessed on September 25, 2021.

23. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR927/MR927.chap2.pdf. Accessed on August 17, 2021.

2022. Joint commissioning of officers into tri services may sound far-fetched, but it is entirely achievable. It would directly impact the jointmanship and jointness, which is the fulcrum of proposed theaterisation. Joint visit of Chiefs of the three Services to their alma-mater National Defence Academy on August 21, 2021, has unknowingly seconded the need for this logic and requirement. The very fact that they are visiting their alma-mater together reaffirms not only the eternity of the bonds of camaraderie imbibed in the academy, but also signifies the spirit of 'jointmanship' that this tri-service training institution stands for.²⁴

24. Press Release of Ministry of Defence titled "Chiefs of the Army, Navy & Air Force visit National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla", August 21, 2021, at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseframePage.aspx?PRID=1747873>. Accessed on August 21, 2021.