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Theatre or Integrated - Future Commands

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As the 77th Independence Day draws close, speculation about the much-awaited declaration of theatre commands is gaining momentum. The chronology of events unfolding in the past few months also indicates the same. There have been several viewpoints on the topic prevalent in the environment. Every perspective expressed has its own logic, argument, and vision, although a few may not be aligned with the general flow of the thoughts and the core issue at hand. It is also certain that the creation of new joint structures would require constant review and modification of the rules, procedures, and structures, as many of the teething and adaptation processes would take significant time and effort.

The Objective of Theaterisation

The Government of India, in its mandate for the Allocation of Business Rules (AoBR) to Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) through the gazette notification released in 2019, explicitly conveys “Facilitation of restructuring of Military Commands for optimal utilisation of resources by bringing about jointness in operations, including through the establishment of joint or theatre commands.”¹ The essence of the mandate defined is to promote jointness and integration from the grass-roots level to the highest hierarchy. The option of creating both a joint/integrated and a theatre command structure is open. Therefore, the entire theaterisation issue needs to be examined through this rule.

Latest Efforts

The chronological events from the beginning of this year are the Combined Commanders’ Conference held at Bhopal in April 2023 and the recent two-day Combined Commanders-in-Chief meeting chaired by the CDS himself in July 2023 at Lucknow. These have preceded the mutually agreed-upon big picture of integrated theatre command by the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC), comprising the CDS and the three service chiefs. It has also been preceded by individual service commanders’ conferences to provide solutions for the implementation of the theatre concept.

Apart from the efforts in the three services, a landmark success was achieved when the government introduced The Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control, and Discipline) Bill 2023. Tabled in the Lok Sabha in March 2023, the bill seeks to empower designated defence heads of inter-services organisations with certain administrative and disciplinary powers over all personnel serving in the command or attached to it.²

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) also organised a two-day-long brainstorming session called ‘*Chintan Shivir*’ in New Delhi on June 19 and 20, 2023, to discuss various issues and challenges faced by its departments and come up with new ideas for better governance and

functioning. The Department of Military Affairs chose the critical issues of integrating and optimising human resource aspects, training, and operational issues towards achieving greater synergy, modernisation, and capability augmentation of the Armed Forces in the realms of the strategic domain. It also included discussions on measures to identify and abolish colonial practises and obsolete laws and further incorporate the country's own ethos and practises into the functioning of the armed forces.³

The initiation of cross-postings of 'Colonel and below' and 'Brigadier and above' levels and the introduction of a common uniform for all officers of Brigadier and above in the Indian Army are two visible efforts that indicate that the realisation of theatre command is imminent and all need to be well equipped to adopt and adapt to the much-awaited joint and integrated working environment.

What is there in a Name?

Coming back to theaterisation, simplistically put, the theatre command is a military organisational structure designed to manage and coordinate military operations in all domains (land, sea, and air) in a specific geographical region, often referred to as a "theatre of operations." The theatre of operations can encompass a large area that may involve multiple countries or regions with different strategic objectives. The theatre command is responsible for planning, executing, and overseeing military operations within its designated area. The space and cyber domains are adding more complexity to defining the finite boundaries of a theatre of war.

Whereas the joint/integrated command is a military command structure that brings together forces from the three services to conduct joint operations. The purpose of a joint command is to improve interoperability and synergy among different services, leveraging their unique capabilities to achieve more effective and efficient military objectives. A joint or integrated command can be established within a specific theatre of operations to ensure collaboration and coordination among the various military services in that area.

Contemporary research by the US Army scholar on the topic also validates this viewpoint that "the theatre of operations is never truly set. Setting a theatre is supposed to be a continuous, long-term process that creates situational understanding and helps to shape conditions for the success of combined military operations."⁴

The research further analyses that "Setting the theatre is an extraordinarily complex task often misunderstood by not only our military and intergovernmental partners but also by those responsible for its planning and execution. Such misunderstanding is largely due to a lack of a

common definition of the concept among the services and our allies.”⁵ This aspect needs to be well researched and understood in the Indian context, keeping in mind the overall wherewithal of the country, including a detailed analysis of all the constituents of the comprehensive national power at present and in the next few decades. At this juncture, it is essential to devote some time to brainstorming on the military terms of theatre command versus integrated command.

Conclusion

Though the present effort to erect theatre commands (probably three) is to be encouraged and supported with all kinds of professional inputs, it would also be a wise step to review the nomenclature of theatre commands. With the present challenges in hand, calling them an integrated command would be a better proposition, as it symbolises the need for integration within and inter-services more than creating a theatre where looking beyond the boundaries is not the actual objective. It is time to restructure the existing 17 command headquarters with complete jointness and integration at all three levels: tactical, operational, and strategic. In a way, all efforts undertaken by the services are actually in this direction only. However, as per the Open source intelligence (OSINT), the entire effort seems to get shadowed under the debate of theaterisation, which is not the motive. A little pause at this stage is essential only to revisit the genesis of the objectives of reorganisation, in which integrated planning and execution of operations form an important and inescapable part of the organisational structure. At the end of the *Amrit Kaal*, India will be better placed and poised to do justice to the theatre command concept to the fullest of its capability and capacity.

Notes:

¹ “Allocation of Business Rules of DMA,” Ministry of Defence, <https://mod.gov.in/sites/default/files/DMAall141220.pdf>. Accessed on July 29, 2023.

² Nitin A. Gokhale, “Formation Of Theatre Commands Progressing Apace” *Bharat Shakti*, July 24, 2023, <https://bharatshakti.in/theatre-commands-crystalizing-at-the-trot/>. Accessed on July 29, 2023.

³ “MoD to hold two-day ‘Chintan Shivir’ to discuss challenges faced by its departments & evolve new ideas for better governance” *Ministry of Defence*, PIB, June 18, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1933204>. Accessed on July 29, 2023.

⁴ Lt. Col. Joseph John Shimerdla and Maj. Ryan Kort, “Setting the Theater A Definition, Framework, and Rationale for Effective Resourcing at the Theater Army Level” *Military Review*, May-June 2018. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Kort-Setting-the-Theater.pdf>. Accessed on July 29, 2023.

⁵ Ibid.