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- The Indo-Pacific: A Concept Yet to Mature  
*Sanu Kainikara*
- Iran's Security Structure: Lessons for India  
*Prateek Prashar*
- The Iranian Nuclear Dilemma: Energy Goals and Proliferation Concerns  
*Sarabjit Kaur*
- Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Evolving Geopolitics of Central Asian Region: Implications for India  
*Anadi*
- A Unique Indian Jointness Model: A Perspective  
*Rajesh Isser*
- Emerging Technologies: Induction Challenges for Warfare  
*Dinesh Kumar Pandey*
- The Impact of SOCMINT on Counterterrorism  
*Priyadarshini Baruah*
- Friendshoring Supply Chain: Emerging Minilateralism?  
*Neha Mishra*

# A UNIQUE INDIAN JOINTNESS MODEL: A PERSPECTIVE

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Much debate and wrangling over theatre commands in India have led to a stalemate in reforming the Indian security apparatus. The desperation of this demand almost indicates an absence of joint-warfighting ethos and record in the Indian military. But that is really not the case when one looks at major wars and operations that India has been involved in since independence. The record shows far greater synergy than that displayed by more evolved militaries.

For a resource-constrained nation like India, jointness in concepts, strategy and capability-building is only part of the equation. The other part is balancing other pressing social priorities and limited budgets. And, therefore, optimising different agency 'visions' and having a coherent and effective capability plan against multiple threats in a multi-domain environment is key to viable national security. Currently, a myriad of issues, some open and some hidden, drive this debate, for example, inter-agency turf battles, manpower control for more clout in decision-making, selective citing of reforms in other evolved nations and an 'under command' syndrome.

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Theatre Commands are sensitive issues within India's military. The fierce debate around it fails to recognise the unique legacy of joint-warfighting it possesses. This article takes cognisance of it and highlights the deeper collaboration and understanding especially at the tactical and operational levels. It raises some basic queries, such as: In a continuum of threats of hybrid warfare, would simple military theatre commands suffice, and can they plug into a whole-of-nation counter to such persistent threats; and, would we need to reconceptualise these encompassing all domains and actors without obsessing about 'under command'? In view of a fast-changing character of conflict ahead, an Indian way of jointness is suggested. The aim of the study is to examine the legacy of jointness, some challenges ahead and a few pointers to the way ahead. While jointness as a formal term came into being only in the new millennium at DSSC, joint operations since independence among the services indicate that the concept was well understood by those who meant business in demanding times.<sup>1</sup>

## EXAMINING THE LEGACY OF JOINTNESS

### *1947-1948*

Immediately after independence, Pakistan rushed into what it considered its unfinished business in Jammu and Kashmir. There are a plethora of accounts and reams written on the subsequent counter by India. It is worth taking note of at least three that stand out as exemplary of jointness.

The first was the saving of the Valley in the nick of time when Pakistani raiders had reached the outskirts of Srinagar. On October 27, 1947, with raiders firing from all sides, 27 Dakota sorties completed the induction of Indian Army's (IA) 1 Sikh battalion with their mortars. The next day, RIAF Spitfires joined in to strafe enemy positions under guidance of 1 Sikh officers. As per MoD records, four battalions and

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1. A. K. Tiwary, "Jointmanship in the Military", *Indian Defence Review*, vol. 26, no. 2 (April-June 2011), at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/>. Accessed on September 2, 2022.

a battery of artillery guns were inducted by October 31.<sup>2</sup> Even the famous stand-off by India's first Param Vir Chakra (posthumous), Major Somnath Sharma and his troops at Badgam was supported by Spitfires and Tempests called in by him.<sup>3</sup> Battles at Pattan, Badgam and Shalateng, among others, were actively supported by fighter aircraft.

The next narrative is about saving Poonch which had been almost overrun from all sides. By mid-December 1947, Brigadier Pritam Singh had made a 750-yard airstrip using local help, and yet this was too small for Dakotas to land. But when it came to a push around December 10, an air bridge was established by 12 Squadron and almost 200 tonnes of supplies were inducted, which included light artillery guns. At a critical juncture, even night sorties were done to induct 25-pounder artillery that saved Poonch. Dakotas were also innovatively used to bomb raider positions by fusing them manually in the aircraft before rolling them off.<sup>4</sup>

The third remarkable effort was the saving of Leh. Captain Prithi and his 40 Lahaulis had gallantly crossed Zoji La Pass and reached Leh, and set up defences by March 1948. But by end-May, the raiders had reached Nimu, just 30 km from Leh. An air bridge was an imperative to save Leh, however, Dakotas had never operated at such heights. Beginning on March 24, 1948, an entire battalion of Gorkhas (2/4 GR) were inducted with their full complement. As more troops and equipment fetched up over the months, the IA was able to push the raiders almost till Skardu. The battles at Zoji La, Dras and Skardu were fully supported by Tempests operating out of Srinagar.<sup>5</sup> The rapid adaptation and a fast-learning curve in these three examples clearly indicate that there was no lack of commitment or ability to innovate jointly to save the situation at hand.

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2. S. N. Prasad and Dharam Pal (eds.), *Operations in Jammu and Kashmir 1947-48*, An official history sponsored by India's Ministry of Defence (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 2005), pp. 34-35.

3. Bharat Kumar, *An Incredible War* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2009), pp. 310-11.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 345.

5. Arjun Subramaniam, *India's Wars, A Military History, 1947-1971* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016), p. 144.

1962

“On 20th October, 1962, the PLA launched its attacks across both the western and eastern sectors of its border with India. Chinese artillery barrages opened up and were followed by infantry assaults.”<sup>6</sup> By November 20, 1962, it fully controlled the entire claimed area in the west, and had reached the foothills all across (then NEFA) Arunachal Pradesh. General B. M. Kaul’s memoirs rue the fact that the IAF was not used in close support, in turn disputed by then IB Chief B. N. Mullik that Kaul had not asked for it. So, where was the professional advice of the potency of air power use?<sup>7</sup>

The political and military decision-making that led to the debacle in 1962 has been analysed by many researchers and participants of that war. Helicopters were extensively used under extremely hostile conditions both in Ladakh and erstwhile NEFA. For example, when 1/8 Gorkhas advanced in the Galwan Valley (Ladakh) in July 1962 to outflank and isolate the PLA position at the head of the valley, it was air maintained for over two months by Mi-4 helicopters of IAF. Troops were rotated stealthily by Mi-4s while the PLA was left wondering. Similarly, between October 20 and 23, Mi-4s, Bell-47s and Sikorsky S-55s carried out hundreds of casualty evacuation by day and night from Tsangdhar and Lumpu as Indian Army retreated under the overwhelming PLA assault. All this under hostile fire that resulted in several downing of helicopters and loss of crew.

When the need arose, joint-tactical innovation came to the fore. For example, the airlift of six AMX-13 light tanks of 20 Lancers to Chusul in An-12s.<sup>8</sup> These were decisive in the tactical battles there. In the east, the detachment support of Mi-4s and Otter aircraft from Walong enabled the Indian Army to give the best riposte to the Chinese. This relative success surely is a good indicator of jointness

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6. J. P. Dalvi, *Himalayan Blunder: The Angry Truth about India’s Most Crushing Military Disaster* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 2010), p. 364.

7. Rajesh Isser, “Exploring Indian Airpower Doctrine and Debacles in the Himalayas”, VIF Paper, July 2, 2020, p. 11, at <https://www.vifindia.org/paper/2020/july/12/exploring-indian-airpower-doctrine-and-debacles-in-the-himalayas>. Accessed on September 1, 2022.

8. Shankar Roychowdhury, “China’s Air Power: Implications for India”, *CLAWS Journal*, Summer 2010, at [www.claws.in/](http://www.claws.in/). Accessed on September 1, 2022.

and synergy at the tactical levels where commanders thought out their actions freely unencumbered by 'under command' templates.

However, a vexing question has been about not using offensive airpower which could have been a decisive asymmetry over the Chinese. While US misinformation (Ambassador Galbraith) did play its part and the Indian Army could not cognitively understand the role air power could have played, Air HQ was guilty of not countering the hype built around the PLA. Incidentally, joint structures were already in place to execute the coordination unlike 1947-1948. But it is a moot point that in the chaotic withdrawal whether the army ever thought of trapping or interdicting the vulnerable PLA and their lines of communication.

### 1965

Pakistan's 1965 campaign against India was with Operation Gibraltar in August 1965 with pushing in of more than 15,000 Razakars (led by army officers) into Jammu and Kashmir. The hope was to trigger a general rebellion and secession. The timing was thought to be vital in terms of India's vulnerability on multiple levels. The first sign of jointness was the Indian Western Commander, Gen Harbaksh asking the IAF Chief for helicopter support in engaging the Razakars. Not only did the IAF jump in with a dozen Mi-4s and some Alouettes, the Mi-4s were modified for an armed role with bombs and front guns in a record time.

This task force was mainly based in Srinagar, and it carried out 79 offensive sorties against the infiltrators from August 20, 1965, till the end of the hostilities. They bombed and strafed the positions of infiltrators in many areas, especially Haji Pir Pass, Tangdhar, Badgam, Mandi, Budil, and the hills around Gurez.<sup>9</sup> It had a great effect on morale on both sides besides the actual damage caused.<sup>10</sup> The helicopters also critically dropped more than 92 tonnes of essential stores and urgently needed ammunition to army groups operating in

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9. Isser, n. 7, p. 7.

10. Harbaksh Singh (Lt Gen), *War Despatches: Indo-Pak Conflict of 1965* (New Delhi: Lancer International, 1991), p. 197.

different inaccessible mountain areas. Hundreds of critical casualties from inaccessible areas were also evacuated.<sup>11</sup>

The main offensive came on September 1, 1965 at Chhamb with Pakistan 12 Division launching Operation Grand Slam with three brigades supported by two regiments of armour and a full-fledged artillery regiment with air defence elements in tow. There was an army bureaucratic delay for clearance, and the IAF Chief was notified only in the late afternoon. Despite the short notice, the first waves of armed Vampires were launched to counter Pakistan armour by 5 p.m. While the armour offensive was stalled, the IAF lost 4 Vampires. Once again, when put into the information loop fully, air support's commitment was spot on.

The other debatable issue is the lack of air support on September 6 when India launched the Lahore offensive. Indian historians have clearly indicated that synergy was poor because of IAF only being brought into the loop when desired by army commanders.<sup>12</sup> Poor and last-minute briefings, vague lists like 'targets of opportunity', useless intelligence, among other reasons missed out on an opportune window to shape the battle. But when the Mystère strikes did take place in the evening, they were devastating on the charging Pattons.

It is common knowledge that J. N. Chaudhuri, the COAS, and Gen Harbaksh Singh were highly dominating personalities and thought of IAF and Indian Navy as adjuncts. ACM P. C. Lal documents this aberration in his memoirs very clearly. Of course, post 1965, some lessons of keeping each other in the loop were learnt and structural changes were made, for example, Tactical Air Centres at Corps level.

### 1971

The creation of a new nation (Bangladesh) in 14 days of war in 1971 is a benchmark few nations can boast of. Having learnt their lessons from 1965, the Indian military was far more amenable to sharing of information, joint-planning, and in general a far greater level of mutual respect and understanding. And, as P. C. Lal wrote,

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11. Rajesh Isser, *Purple Legacy: Indian Air Force Helicopters in Service of the Nation* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 25-27.

12. S. N. Prasad and U. P. Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965: A History* (Dehradun and Delhi: Natraj Publishers, 2011).

commanders at all levels interacted and were kept in the loop, besides all Indian Army Corps having well-trained forward air controllers or FACs with them.<sup>13</sup> The final operational order had no mention of Dacca, and perhaps a reasonable slice for absorbing the millions of refugees in India was seen as a doable campaign objective. However, as is so with every war, fog of war and uncertainties brought about major challenges and opportunities.

The outstanding example worth studying in how creativity, trust, boldness and adaptability can produce the finest jointmanship is the partnership between the IAF and Gen Sagat Singh. The original plan of the Indian Military was to liberate a slice of East Pakistan to offload the nearly 10 million refugees that had come to India fleeing the genocide happening there. Sagat, who was the Corps Commander of the eastern-based IV Corps, was strictly instructed to restrict his operations east of River Meghna. To be frank, his was to be a feint—a sideshow to confuse Gen Niazi, the commander of Pak forces in (then) East Pakistan.

However, if there was anything that Sagat had learnt from his bold and unconventional tactics in the liberation of Goa, and the famous riposte to the Chinese at Nathu La in 1967, it was that victories and defeats really took place in the minds of military and political leaders. And he instinctively drew a vision which needed some novel operations by the IAF. The greatest opposition to his vision was not the Pak Army but his own superiors—his Army Commander and the Army Chief! Sagat's 'madness' had great method to it that was not evident to most others. But he had the full confidence of his subordinate commanders. He had decided to probe, feint, and bypass strongly-held positions and the 'fort' mentality of Gen Niazi. In simple words, create a controlled chaos and confusion in the minds of the Pakistan Army leadership.

Starting with a probe using ageing Mi-4 helicopters and a battalion of Gorkhas by day and night on December 7 and 8, he effectively blocked and seized two Pak brigades at Sylhet.<sup>14</sup> Among other things, the plan was helped by a BBC misreporting of a brigade or more

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13. P. C. Lal, *My Years with the IAF* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1986), p. 174.

14. Randhir Singh, *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of Lt Gen Sagat Singh* (New Delhi: Vij Books India/United Service Institution of India, 2013), p. 161.



of Indian troops being heli-landed. The fearless Gorkhas seemed 20 feet tall. Pressing on this newly gained tactic of leapfrogging in helicopters, he planned even more audaciously with the IAF to reach Dacca. But his superiors had forbidden it, and he had an answer for that—don't tell them and stop speaking to the army commander! This has been documented.

The final Meghna crossings of a fully combat-ready brigade at Narsingdi, Baidya Bazaar and Raipura on December 9-10 and up to December 15 in just 10 Mi-4s broke the last bit of resistance left in the Pak garrisons. And this was done without aerial firepower of the IAF since it was beyond their range. After December 10, IAF Gnats moved to Agartala and provided the firepower to Sagat's forces. Sensing the opportunity, IAF launched the largest ever airborne operation in the subcontinent at Tangail. This brigade drop not only blocked any enemy reinforcements from the north, but also cemented the sense of doom in Dacca among the Pak Army. And, of course, when there was still a resistance to surrender Dacca, the coup de grace was served by IAF Hunter aircraft with a precision attack on the Governor's House on December 16. That finally broke the proverbial camel's back, and Bangladesh was born.

### ***1999 Kargil***

In his book *In the Line of Fire*, Musharraf claims that just five NLI battalions forced Indian Army to deploy four divisions and the bulk of the Indian artillery from strike formations; hinting that entire national resources, including their air force was forced into action by a simple Pakistani tactical action in 1999.<sup>15</sup> That is the cost to be paid when information is restricted to avoid any blame. It is clear that a clever enemy will not fight the war you want; and, therefore, flexibility and adaptability of minds of leaders and commanders can only happen in an atmosphere where trust and 'loyal dissent' is encouraged at every step of thinking and executing war.

The information void with the IAF and IN was inexplicable. For example, IAF was informed, along with a request for air strikes on May 8, 1999 and the COAS left for a Poland and Czech

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15. Isser, n. 7, p. 31.

Republic trip on May.<sup>16</sup> As Chairman COSC, the COAS should have kept the other chiefs in the loop when things had become serious enough for requesting air support, and cancelled his trip at the least. Notwithstanding, when the government allowed permission to conduct operations restricted to Indian side, IAF could have had a faster learning loop to realise that PGMs were the only answer for these unique targets. The penchant to stay in a closed loop by the Indian Army persisted even when drawing lessons—learnt post the operation. For example, a six-volume report by the Directorate of Military Operations and Army Training Command was completed a couple of years after the Kargil conflict, but its contents had remained a secret from the other two services, and without any meaningful debates.

During the Indian Peacekeeping Mission in Sri Lanka (1986-1989), helicopters were put entirely under IA control through local IAF base commanders. The author was witness to many operations undertaken where there was no lack of commitment to the ground plan. But many failures happened because the basic plan was made by an IA closed-loop process with air power requirements spelt out later. This took away all the advantages of air power as a campaign-shaping tool.

Essentially, all the above examples point to a deep understanding and commitment at the tactical and even operational level of jointmanship between the services during active operation. Respecting core competencies and more integrated practices can improve professional understanding of each other.

### **THE WAY AHEAD**

All plans go awry on the first shot, is an old military adage, and probably the only one that has withstood pressures to change like everything else has. This is just acknowledging that the only thing certain in conflict is uncertainty. And while newer terms are being framed around it, sheer power to adapt quickly is the most important quality in leaders to mitigate uncertainty and complexity. It is also applicable to the importance and usefulness of doctrines and principles of war in a real battle. They can never be rigidly stuck to,

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16. Isser, n. 7, p. 29.

and only provide a framework when deliberating on the next course of action. In fact, with the rapid change in character of combat, many of these could contradict each other, for example, massing of forces.

An entirely new generation of network enabled weapons, possessing both precision and potency, and aided by real-time intelligence by pervasive sensors and high-speed analytics, is fast changing the nature of warfare. Most of the damage, both material and psychological, will happen before contact by troops. Importantly, all such weapons will have sensors and networking to enable real-time battle damage assessment, a vital issue in combat. The entire gamut of sensing, planning, deciding, and acting will necessarily need coordination across all five domains, many involving non-military agencies. So, a template of 'under command' may need a fresh look especially since technology permits recording of all decision-making and, in turn, accountability.

Information dominance will entail a myriad of issues such as the ability to protect your data and networks, high-speed processing, and dissemination capability in an uninterrupted manner, and denying all these to the adversary. Multidomain synergised operations would demand shared battlespace awareness among men, autonomous machines and commanders of different sub-units. In such a networked high-pace battle, decision-making and allocation of targets/tasks will have to be quick, keeping a battlespace whole-picture framework. The Russo-Ukraine War has only reiterated the complexity and uncertainty of modern conflict, with assumptions such as short-swift conflicts, non-vulnerability of supply lines and optimal stockpiling armaments, and just-in-time maintenance concepts being severely questioned. Campaign coherence and sustainability are two major concerns affecting all actors, irrespective of the colour of their uniforms.

Hybrid and whole-of-nation nature of conflict that allows weaponising of all leverages available, including economic, cyber-infrastructure and technology, is changing the very foundations of norms and rules underpinning the international order and competition. The criticality of dependencies affecting sovereign decision-making points to the importance of self-reliance and having national force structures and capabilities based on inherent strengths.

A tussle between manned fighter aircraft on one side and AI-enabled capabilities such as unmanned combat platforms and surface-to-surface long-range precision missiles is on hand. Keeping in mind longer times of actualisation from force acquisition decisions, the deliberations had to be done yesterday! And this is talking of only a sub-part of one domain. In an age of multidomain warfare, decision-making at the government level gets even more confounded. Airspace or aerospace is an indivisible entity, without demarcated borders or theatres for all sides in a conflict. This all-pervasive character presents opportunities to calibrate and control coherent battle execution over land and sea. Importantly, ownership or control of this is dynamic in time and space is unlike over land or the sea. Also, dominance over this airspace is fleeting and nearly impossible to be achieved sustainably, even by powers with the latest and largest air arsenals.

In India's case, manifestations of the threat from the two prime adversaries will range across all domains, especially in the grey zone below red-line thresholds. In such a continuum of threats of hybrid warfare would simple military theatre commands suffice? Can it plug into a whole-of-nation counter to such persistent threats? Would we need to reconceptualise these encompassing all domains and actors without obsessing about 'under command'? After all, it is possible to have fluid models of task-allocation, responsibilities and accountability as we have sometimes seen in mammoth humanitarian and disaster responses by our armed forces in the form of task-forces.

