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THEATRE COMMANDS

Pros and Cons

Mehul Singh Gill

Edited by: Ishani Sharma

INTRODUCTION

The nature of warfare in the 21st century bears little resemblance to the large-scale wars of the 20th century. The nature of the international order and the interventionist attitude of the world's superpowers implies that a modern war will not last long. Added to that is the preference of nations engaging in warfare to keep the war as short as possible in order to minimise the damage to their economy and reduce the loss of lives. Thus, militaries around the world have made efforts to increase their ability to fight a modern war, with emphasis on factors such as speed and networking, with the use of autonomous weapons systems, long range weapons, laser guided systems and drones in order to maximise gains in the shortest possible time, while keeping their own losses as low as possible.

The Indian Armed Forces currently consist of 17 Service-Specific Commands, 7 for the Indian Army, 7 for the Air Force and 3 for the Indian Navy, along with 2 Tri-service commands.¹ As a part of efforts to modernise the Indian Armed Forces and increase their ability to fight a modern war, one proposal, that has consistently been put forward, is the formation of Theatre commands.

According to the current arrangement of having service-specific commands, the C-in-Cs of each Command report to their respective service chiefs. However, under the new proposal for having theatre commands, every command is given a specific geographical area to take care of, where the resources of all the services in the region will be under the direct command of a single theater commander, thus, allowing the commander to have quicker access to support from different services, instead of having to go through the different vertical and horizontal layers of cross service communications, which is inevitably far more time consuming and complicated, and would not be as effective. The commander of a theater command will also have complete freedom to train and equip their forces to better achieve their mandate.

FOREIGN EXPERIENCES

Naturally, India is not the only country who is looking at integrating its forces. Many countries have recognised the need for integration between the different services, with some countries having already set up an effective and robust system, and continuously improving upon their

¹ Philip, S.A. (2021). "What are military theatre commands and why does India want to switch to them?" , *The Print*, 6 July 2021. Available at <https://theprint.in/defence/what-are-military-theatre-commands-and-why-does-india-want-to-switch-to-them/690487/> (Accessed on 22 August 2021).

strengths and weaknesses, while other countries are trying their best to implement such a system. The countries whose approach to integration and Theaterisation is the most valuable for one to explore would be the United States of America or USA (a superpower with a global presence), the United Kingdom or UK (from whom most of our Military organisation and traditions have been derived) and China (an emerging power, and the power that poses the greatest threat to Indian security).

United States

The first American experiment with joint operations occurred in WW2. American forces in both Europe and the Pacific theatres were more or less placed under a single commander responsible for that theatre, General Eisenhower in Europe and General MacArthur in the Pacific, so that the commanders could better utilise the resources at their disposal, and to be better able to react to changes and act decisively. However, at the end of the war, the Americans found certain worrying gaps in their higher command structure. To resolve this, a new position was created of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, who was effectively senior to the individual service chiefs and was the single point of advice to the political leadership.

The pivotal moment of inter-service integration in the American armed forces came with the passing of the Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986,² which had a number of objectives which were intended to improve the effectiveness of the armed forces as a whole. The legislation aimed to do so by focusing on improving the inter-operability and coordination between the different services at both Strategic and Operational levels. It also streamlined the chain of command, by making Theatre commanders report directly to the Secretary of Defence and the President, and effectively bypassed the service chiefs. The role of the service chiefs was reduced to matters such as training and equipment of the various theatre commands and advising the president.

As of 2021, the United States military has 6 theatre commands with 4 functional commands supporting them. In 2016, the Goldwater Nichols was reviewed, where it transpired that the civilian bureaucracy lacked an understanding of military affairs, which led to incidents such as the fiasco of the Second Gulf War. The study group that reviewed the act recommended increasing the role played by the Joint Staff to contribute to the development of strategy, and to give alternatives to the civilian leadership, among other reviews, to try and reduce the redundancies it faced and to increase savings.³

² Goldwater-Nichols Act, Encyclopedia.com. Available at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/goldwater-nichols-act> (Accessed on 22 August 2021).

³ McInnis, Kathleen J. (2016). "Goldwater-Nichols at 30: Defense Reform and Issues for Congress", *Congressional Research Service*. Available at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44474.pdf> (Accessed on 21 August 2021).

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom was one of the first countries to recognise the need for joint-services planning and inter-service coordination, setting up the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1923.⁴ It was effectively a variation of this system that the armed forces of the British Raj used, and formed the basis for the organisation of the army of the newly independent India.

Post WW2, the British armed forces also looked at integrating the various services. In 1959, the post of Chief of Defence Staff was created, who was senior to the service chiefs, and was the principal military advisor to the political leadership. By 1963, the UK, also, had integrated the Headquarters of the Army, Navy and Air Force into the Ministry of Defence. A dedicated Joint forces Headquarters was established in 1996,⁵ under the Command of the CDS, to oversee all operations of the British Armed Forces. This structure provides the basis for integrated operations in the British Armed Forces and continues to be improved upon.

People's Republic of China

Until very recently, the Chinese Military system did not consist of any joint command and control structures. The Chinese Armed forces consisted of 7 Military regions. In peacetime, each service was commanded by their respective service chiefs, while in wartime, it would be the commanders of the Military districts who would exercise total control over all the resources. This system meant that they would have to switch from a peacetime method of operating to a different wartime method of operating at a moment's notice which, of course, presented its own limitations.⁶

The 2015 Chinese Military White Paper highlighted the need for emphasis on Joint operations and the development of joint doctrines and command and control structures. To this end, in 2016, the seven Military regions of the Chinese armed forces were re-organised into 5 Theater commands,⁷ with joint logistics chains being established.

⁴ Vice Admiral Das, P.S. (2007). "Jointness in India's Military: What it is and what it must be, *Journal of Defence Studies*", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Available at https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_1_1_psdas.pdf (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

⁵ Rana, V. S. (2015) "Enhancing Jointness in Indian Armed Forces: Case for Unified Commands", *Journal of Defence Studies*, 9 (1), pp. 33-62. Available at http://idsa.in/jds/9_1_2015_EnhancingJointnessinIndianArmedForces.html (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

⁶ China Military Power report, (2019). Defense Intelligence Agency US. Available at https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf (Accessed on 21 August 2021).

⁷ China Military Power report, (2019). Defense Intelligence Agency US. Available at https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf (Accessed on 21 August 2021).

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

While some countries have managed to set up an effective and robust system of inter-service cooperation and joint operations, it must be noted that simply copying the methods these countries used will not do the job. India is a big country with a wide range of diverse terrains and threats, ranging from two nuclear-armed neighbours who have often been hostile with us (a situation that perhaps no other country faces), along with a continuous insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir. Thus, the requirements and peculiarities of the Indian scenario must be taken into account.

Another aspect that must be considered is the history of Military reforms and efforts at integrating the various service arms, efforts which, have led to the current command and control structure of the Armed forces.

In the Armies of the British Raj, all military affairs came under the authority of the Commander-in-Chief India, a joint commander of all the three arms of the British Indian Forces, who was second only to the Viceroy. Post WW2, a committee was set up under Major General, the Lord Ismay, who proposed a system similar to the British Chiefs of Staff Committee, but instead the Chairmanship of the Committee would be held on a rotational basis amongst the three services.⁸

Immediately after Independence, India's military leaders, who had seen extensive action in the Burmese theater of WW2, and thus, understood the need for cooperation between the different services in order to achieve their objectives, pressed for greater interactions between the services. This was done by establishing two tri-services institute, First, the Joint Services Wing at Khadakwasla (which would later go on to become the National Defence Academy), the only institute of its kind in the world at the time. It had the mandate of training young cadets to become officers, while maintaining close relations with cadets from the different services. The second was the formation of the Defence Services Staff College in Wellington, where officers from the three services would meet and study together. Later on, another addition was made, that of the College of Defence Management at Secunderabad, followed by the National Defence College at New Delhi, which brings together senior officers from the three services as well as Civil Servants in order to increase cooperation amongst those who would go on to become decision makers.⁹

The Indian Victory in the 1971 war has been constantly attributed to the coordination amongst the various armed services, however, this has been criticised because this cooperation was more or less as a result of personal understanding between the various chiefs, but did not have a fixed structure to promote inter-service cooperation. The Sri Lankan Crisis and the subsequent Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) intervention gave a chance for the country's policymakers to try and weigh the benefits of a theatre command system in combat conditions, with the Force

⁸ Vice Admiral Das, P.S. (2007). "Jointness in India's Military: What it is and what it must be, Journal of Defence Studies", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Available at https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_1_1_psdas.pdf (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

⁹ Vice Admiral Das, P.S. (2007). "Jointness in India's Military: What it is and what it must be, Journal of Defence Studies", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Available at https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_1_1_psdas.pdf (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

Commander of the IPKF being declared as a theatre commander with full control over air and naval assets. This, however, did not last long, as both the Indian Air Force and the Navy raised objections to the manner in which their assets were being used, and persuaded their respective service chiefs to revert back to the old command structure.¹⁰

Post the Indian Victory at Kargil in 1999, which saw a very high casualty rate amongst Indian soldiers, the Government constituted a committee to examine the events that took place during the war to figure out what went wrong, and to propose recommendations to make the necessary changes. Amongst the recommendations submitted by the committee were proposals to appoint a Chief of Defence Staff, the need to improve coordination amongst the services and with the Ministry of Defence, and the need for joint operational commands, demands which were further reiterated by the Shekatkar Committee.¹¹

The next logical step was to form an integrated theatre command. The Andaman and Nicobar Command along with the Strategic Forces Command were the first Tri-services commands in the Indian Armed Forces. The Andaman and Nicobar command would act as a testing ground for the new theories, where command and control procedures, methods of inter-service integration and doctrines and working rules would be developed, and subsequently be used by the other theatre commands whenever they were to be formed.¹²

On the 1st of January 2020, the Government of India appointed the then Army Chief, General Bipin Rawat, as the Chief of Defence Staff.¹³ A separate Department of Military Affairs (DMA) was formed at the Ministry of Defence, under his purview. The formation of the DMA and appointment of a CDS was seen as a sign that the Government had recognised the necessity of the formation of Theatre commands.

PROPOSALS FOR THEATRE COMMANDS

According to media reports, the government is planning on forming 5 geographical based Theatre commands.¹⁴ The first theatre command likely to be formed is the Air Defence

¹⁰ Vice Admiral Das, P.S. (2007). "Jointness in India's Military: What it is and what it must be, *Journal of Defence Studies*", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Available at https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_1_1_psdas.pdf (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

¹¹ Gokhale, N. (2017). "Preparing the Army for the Future: Shekatkar Committee's 'To Do' List", *Swarajya*, 10 January 2017. Available at [Preparing The Army For The Future: Shekatkar Committee's 'To Do' List \(swarajyamag.com\)](http://www.swarajyamag.com/preparing-the-army-for-the-future-shekatkar-committee-s-to-do-list) (Accessed on 21 August 2021).

¹² Rana, V. S. (2015) "Enhancing Jointness in Indian Armed Forces: Case for Unified Commands", *Journal of Defence Studies*, 9 (1), pp. 33-62. Available at http://idsa.in/jds/9_1_2015_EnhancingJointnessinIndianArmedForces.html (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

¹³ "Gen Bipin Rawat Announced as Chief of Defence Staff", *Press Information Bureau of India*. Available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1598029> (Accessed on 22 August 2021).

¹⁴ Gupta, S. (2020). "India to get 5 military commands, one each for China and Pak", *Hindustan Times*, 27 Oct 2020 Available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-get-5-military-theatre-commands-one-each-for-china-and-pak/story-UzFJNollsvpj3tcUetWVNM.html> Accessed 21 August 2021

Command, which would pool together the air defence resources of all the three services and would be headed by an officer of the Indian Air Force.¹⁵ These reports also suggest that a Western Command would be formed and tasked with ensuring security on the border along with Pakistan. A Northern Command would also be established, along the Chinese border, whereas a Single Maritime theatre command would be formed under the command of a Naval officer.

Some scholars have also suggested that the Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh region be placed under a separate theatre command of its own, owing to the unique challenges of the region.¹⁶ Others have also expressed a disappointment at the fact that only one Maritime Theatre Command is to be formed, advocating, instead, for a minimum of at least two maritime commands, in order to effectively ensure the security of the seas in the India Ocean Region (IOR) and as well as be able to project power efficiently.¹⁷ There are also calls for a joint logistics command, a joint training command and an Electronic warfare command.

There is also a rather interesting proposal to keep the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) from being integrated into the Maritime Theater Command, arguing, instead, that owing to the vast amount of experience the ANC has gathered, and the fact that it consists of some of the only amphibious brigades of the Indian Army, the ANC would present the perfect group from which the nucleus of a new Expeditionary Force could be formed, which could be ready to move at extremely short notice to foreign countries to protect Indian interests.¹⁸

SUPPORT

The concept of Theatre commands is being proposed with both Military and Financial considerations in mind.

The current command and control situation is far too complicated and time consuming, which can prove the difference between life and death in a combat situation. Following is an excerpt

¹⁵ Gupta, S. (2020). "India to get 5 military commands, one each for China and Pak", *Hindustan Times*, 27 Oct 2020 Available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-get-5-military-theatre-commands-one-each-for-china-and-pak/story-UzFJNollsvpj3tcUetWVNM.html> Accessed 21 August 2021

¹⁶ Col. Jadhav, A. (2021). "Theaterisation: A Desideratum for National Security", *Centre for Land Warfare Studies*, August 2021. Available at <https://www.claws.in/publication/theaterisation-a-desideratum-for-national-security/> (Accessed 20 August 2021)

¹⁷ Pai, N. (2020). "Why India needs two maritime theatres of command, not one", *The Print*, 22 December 2020. Available at <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-india-needs-two-maritime-theatres-of-command-not-one/571260/> (Accessed 21 August 2021)

¹⁸ Pai, N. (2020). "Why India needs two maritime theatres of command, not one", *The Print*, 22 December 2020. Available at <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-india-needs-two-maritime-theatres-of-command-not-one/571260/> (Accessed 21 August 2021)

from ‘Jointness in India’s Military: What it is and what it must be’, where the writer explains the cumbersome process of getting air support:¹⁹

“The three Service Chiefs, despite having been converted from Commanders-in-Chief of their respective wings into Chiefs of Staff in 1955, continue to act in their former roles and are, therefore, responsible for conduct of operations. They do this by issuing directives to their respective commanders; for example, in the Navy, these are the Western and Eastern Naval Commands which, in turn, give out orders to their subordinate operational commanders and task forces. Where any assistance is required from another wing, say air support from the Air Force, this has to be arranged through the Maritime Air Operations (MAO) authority in Mumbai, an Air Force institution, acting as the link. The MAO interacts with the appropriate Air Force Command headquarters which, in turn, issues instructions to the IAF station holding the relevant air assets. Often, Air Headquarters itself may have to be approached. The arrangement is about the same as far as the Army is concerned. All operational Army Commands have Air Force elements attached to them, not as subordinates but as advisers. They, in turn, interact with their own superiors to arrange the desired support through Air Force stations. In brief, the inter-Service interaction is through several tiers, both laterally and vertically. The desired air support might not be provided, possibly for good reason and even if it is, may not be in the form and strength requisitioned. Thus, the person responsible for execution of a task does not have control over all the forces that are deployed; on the other hand, the authority providing supporting forces is not responsible for successful achievement of the operation. The shortcomings of this system are readily apparent.”

This situation is not a desirable one, since this involves a lot of unnecessary bureaucracy, and delays of this sort could be disastrous in wartime.

Having command of both ground and air assets would also allow the commander to act faster, more independently, and in a more decisive manner. Here, the commander can immediately direct the air assets under his control to render whatever support he deems necessary.

The Theaterisation of commands will also help in vastly improving the dismal teeth-to-tail ratio of the Indian armed forces. Mechanisms such as a joint logistics command will vastly cut down on duplication of efforts across the three services, and in doing so, will open up officers tied up behind desks to be posted to field formations and units facing shortages of officers.

The cutting down of flab, and reduction of duplication of efforts will also result in streamlining the armed forces, and in doing so, help in reducing the expenditure incurred by the armed forces on salaries and pensions. This will also enable more funds to be released into equipment modernisation efforts and the like.

¹⁹ Vice Admiral Das, P.S. (2007). “Jointness in India’s Military: What it is and what it must be, Journal of Defence Studies”, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Available at https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_1_1_psdas.pdf (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

According to Das, the Indian Navy is the foremost proponent of the efforts at Making theatre commands, whereas the opinion is divided within the Army, with the younger officers supporting the Navy's viewpoint, and the older officers believing that Theatre commands would not be suited to counter some challenges India faces such as that of terrorism in Kashmir.²⁰

CRITICISMS

The foremost critic of the Theaterisation efforts is the Indian Air Force, with tensions running high in many cases as officers from the other services accuse the Air Force of hampering efforts at Theaterisation merely to protect its own turf.

Many officers of the Air Force, however, have come up with a list of criticism and weaknesses that the plan to integrate the various commands presents. Air Chief Marshal Krishnaswamy remains highly skeptical of the proposal to create Theatre commands, arguing that such measures would result in spending huge sums of money with doubtful returns.²¹ Air Marshal Menon maintains that the sole reason China and the USA could afford to engage in Theaterisation efforts was due to their stable and reliable military-industrial complex, one which India lacks, being the second largest importer of arms in the world. He, thus, states that the first step for India is to give rise to a suitable military-industrial complex before engaging in wide scale reforms.²² According to Grp Capt. Bewoor, Theatre commands are required only by countries who have international ambitions and capabilities to support expeditionary forces, such as the USA. He argues that neither does India have such ambitions, nor does it have the capabilities to execute such ambitions, thus, making theatre commands irrelevant in the Indian context.²³

CONCLUSION

With the Appointment of General Bipin Rawat as the CDS and the formation of the Department of Military Affairs within the MoD, the government of India has shown that it has pretty much accepted the fact that Integrated Theatre Commands need to be established. However, the main

²⁰ Vice Admiral Das, P.S. (2007). "Jointness in India's Military: What it is and what it must be, Journal of Defence Studies", *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, Available at https://idsa.in/system/files/jds_1_1_psdas.pdf (Accessed on 20 August 2021).

²¹ Air Chief Marshal Krishnaswamy, (2018). "Why theatre commands is an unnecessary idea", *The Indian Express*, August 16 2018, Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/why-military-theatre-commands-is-an-unnecessary-idea-5308890/> (Accessed on 22 August 2021).

²² Air Marshal Menon, (2018). "Theatre Commands: The Indian Context", *Centre for Air Power Studies*, 20 August 2018. Available at http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_Infocus_NM_00.pdf (Accessed on 22 August 2018).

²³ Gp Capt Bewoor, (2018). "The unacceptable idea of theatre commands", *Centre for Air Power Studies*, 7 August 2018. Available at http://capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_Infocus_AB_00.pdf (Accessed on 22 August 2021).

point of contention remains as to how and when must it be done. There is consensus that the efforts to integrate the different services at the grassroot level have failed, and that if integration is to be achieved, it must be done in a top-down manner. Historical examples, such as that of the USA, show that the armed forces never accepted integration themselves, and that integration only took place when it was forced upon the military by the civilian leadership, as in the case of the Goldwater Nichols Act. Thus, the political leadership needs to be firm and decisive about the matter of the Theatre commands, and it must formulate clear security goals as to what it wants to achieve. Having a clear goal will help simplify the process of Theaterisation enormously. Scholars also agree on the fact that Theaterisation must be gradual in nature, given the state of constant threat that India faces, it cannot afford to throw its forces into disarray. Implementing these reforms will naturally cause some problems that might even seem detrimental until proper procedures etc. are established, but will prove to be a boon in the long run and are certainly worth putting effort into.

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