A report in the newspapers last week stated that the Indian armed forces are expected to be transformed from their current individual service structures into five integrated theatre commands. The report mentioned two land-based commands, one each for China and Pakistan, a Peninsula Command, an Air Defence Command and a Maritime Command. The report also stated that the two land-based commands would be based in Lucknow for the Northern and Eastern front and Jaipur for the Western front.

Simultaneously there were reports of the Army Chief, General Naravane, addressing students at the College of Defence Management, where he discussed reforms in the armed forces. He is reported to have stated that the next logical step would be the ‘formation of Integrated Theatre Commands to synergise the capabilities and combat potential of the three services during war and peace’. He also cautioned that the process will be ‘deliberate, thoughtful and well considered’ and will take a ‘number of years’ to fructify. He also warned of midcourse corrections in the process.

Another report over the weekend stated that the army is fast-tracking its rebalancing of forces and firepower to the northern borders and the IOR ‘in a decisive shift away from its decades long focus on the western front with
Pakistan and combatting militancy.’ It quoted an army official stating, ‘The rebalance from the land borders with Pakistan to the LAC and the maritime domain was gradually underway for some years now. But Ladakh has accelerated all plans.’ This was stated to be the focus in the recently concluded army commander conference.

The appointment of a CDS, which was long awaited had become a reality on 01 Jan this year. He is mandated to create theatre commands within 3 years. This led to a series of simultaneous studies by different services and acceptance of proposals by all service chiefs. Once approved within the system and the government, these were to be implemented.

There is no doubt that creation of theatre commands is a major decision, which will involve deliberation and discussions. These cannot be established and then restructured based on initial faulty designs. The CDS and service chiefs must agree on their structuring and areas of responsibilities. Even after their creation, there is a time factor before they are operationalized and effective. Theatre commands being multi-service would imply a larger time penalty before operationalization. The management of responsibilities in the interim necessitates equal deliberation and consideration.

Currently, Indian armed forces face their most critical crisis in decades along its northern borders. Based on the belief that diplomacy, a coupled economy and proximity of leaders would handle the Chinese threat, reducing fears of an oft spoken two-front war, many defence modernization programs had been forced shut or slowed down. The creation of the Mountain Strike Corps had been stalled, purchase of new equipment slowed, and forces compelled to accept budget cuts in the belief that there was no threat on the horizon. The forces were continuously reprioritizing their requirements as also pushing back procurements. Force multipliers inducted were bleeding service budgets based on maintenance costs.

The army itself was undergoing restructuring. It had only recently tried, tested and approved the creation of Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs). These are currently in the process of being raised.

Any restructuring comes with time and cost penalties. No force can be considered as restructured prior to being employed in war games and battle
exercises to hone skills, test operational capabilities and integrate all arms and services into one fighting formation. Every event involves cost, some open, some hidden. In addition, is the time factor for each event or exercise including evaluations and incorporating lessons learnt. The higher the level of restructuring, the greater the cost, time penalties and temporary upheavals.

Into this scenario of Indian armed forces greatest reorganization and restructuring came the Chinese intrusions in Ladakh. There are currently over 50,000 troops deployed in the region, maintenance of whom would remain a challenge as the weather worsens. Air power is being employed to support these forces as also to counter any attempts by China to further enhance tensions. Naval power continues to expand its footprints in the IOR.

The Chinese intrusion is unlikely to end soon. Even if China reverts to status quo ante, the threat will remain. The current intrusion led to reserves being committed with speed to stall the Chinese advance. Many would remain in situ, while others may withdraw to locations close by for early redeployment in case the situation warrants. The intrusion also led to the army re-evaluating its force requirements along the northern and eastern frontiers.

Fresh reserves need to be recreated by either sidestepping or allocating dual task formations. Simultaneously, the raising of the Mountain Strike Corps would be under discussion. Whether reserves and the Mountain Strike Corps would involve additional forces being raised or reallocated from elsewhere is a policy decision to be taken by those at the helm.

In summary, the army is considering reallocation of forces for northern and eastern sectors, restructuring its divisions into IBGs and simultaneously working towards creating theatre commands. All this during an ongoing crisis, the end of which appears nowhere on the horizon. Thus, there is a need to reassess the entire spectrum of actions, plan sequentially and proceed ahead with caution.

Ideally, the army should first concentrate on reallocation of forces to enhance capabilities along the northern and eastern borders. The quantum of forces essential in each sector and the source from where they could be redeployed/ reallocated is a decision of service HQs. Similar is the decision
of whether they need physical movement or re-tasking. This decision would impact sectors from where forces have been relocated or reallocated.

The next stage should be reconsidering the IBG concept in the wake of these reallocations and reallocations. It could lead to creation of enlarged IBGs or continuing with the conventional model. These would then need to be war gamed and exercised, prior to being finally accepted and created.

It is after these structures have been established should the final stage of creating theatre commands be undertaken. Till then studies, discussions and war games to establish theatre commands, their locations, organization structures, tasking and operational control be firmed in. Once the decision is taken, they should become effective in the shortest possible timeframe.

The armed forces need to move forward in stages rather than simultaneously. There is no need to rush and time should not be a constraint. Simultaneously the hierarchy should understand that there is little scope for error.

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