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THE INDIAN AIR FORCE AND THEATERISATION – MISPLACED APPREHENSIONS



Rear Admiral Monty Khanna, AVSM, NM is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, College of Naval Warfare, Mumbai and Naval War College, USA. He is presently Chief Instructor (Navy), DSSC Wellington

The approach of the Indian Armed Forces towards enhancing jointmanship and its progression towards theaterisation has been a convoluted one. Depending upon the leadership of the time as well as the security situation prevailing, we have moved in fits and starts. Recommendations of government-led initiatives such as the Kargil Review Committee and the Naresh Chandra Committee, tepid as they were, have

been watered down by the MoD as well as service bureaucracies stalling action on key suggestions. As a consequence, reform has been minimalistic and we continue to be unique in the way we are structured when we compare with other armed forces of the world.

Having been the Commandant of the Naval War College for close to four years and the Chief Instructor (Navy) at the Defence Services Staff College



thereafter, I have been party to numerous discussions, debates, seminars, and conferences on this subject. Participants have included serving officers from the armed forces in different positions of leadership, senior veterans, bureaucrats, politicians, columnists and academics. All have spoken with different voices derived from their own perceptions. There has, however, been one organisation that has spoken on key issues of integration in general and theaterisation in particular with a single voice, that being the Indian Air Force (IAF). The alignment in articulation of views on this subject that they have been able to achieve is remarkable and speaks volume of their ability to message the service position across their rank and file. There is, however, a downside of such an approach. It stymies intellectual debate on a vital issue, and worse; you get branded as the spoilsport responsible for holding up military reform, a tag which the IAF has regrettably acquired.

It is unfair to resort to finger-pointing and criticism without attempting to understand the underlying issues that have caused the IAF to vehemently oppose theaterisation. In this article, I have attempted to do so and offer a counter-argument that may resonate with a few readers. What then are the fundamental reasons for the IAF foot-dragging on theaterisation?

The Operational Argument

Theaterisation is essentially an expeditionary requirement. Since we have live borders with homeland defence as a key task, there is no requirement for us to go down this path.

Theaterisation undoubtedly owes its genesis to campaigns fought at considerable distances with an emphasis on manoeuvre. However, given the rapid changes in technology, many of the tenets of expeditionary warfare such as manoeuvre, simultaneity and all arms operations now equally apply to battles conducted closer home.

Under our present structure, if we were to be in conflict with our western neighbour, we would have four army commands, two air force commands and one naval command engaged in battle. None of these commands are collinear insofar as their Areas of Responsibility (AoR) are concerned and no two headquarters are collocated. Added to these are the elements of space and cyber agencies, which could possibly become functional commands in due course. Getting all of them to function coherently in peace time is difficult to say the least. Add to this the fog and friction of combat and you are looking at an organizational nightmare. Rapid and optimally sequenced and synchronized application of force using multiple vectors

can only be achieved through unity of command. The requirement for single point control and responsibility of forces engaged in combat is inescapable, and there is no better a person to perform this task than a theater commander charged with the responsibility of fighting and winning a war against an adversary. He has to perform the function of a master puppeteer, orchestrating the employment of all the vectors placed at his disposal to ensure victory at minimal cost. He has to resolve disputes amongst his subordinate commanders as they emerge, particularly those concerning allocation of resources. It is but natural for instance, that the clamour for fire support, be it from air, ground or in some cases maritime assets will reach a crescendo during the heat of battle. If resources were limitless, this would not be a problem. However, that is utopian for in the real world, demand will far exceed supply and there will be a pressing need for prioritisation. In the absence of an overarching theater commander, the only recourse for resolving such disputes is either through pre-allocation of resources (which is inefficient) or through referral to service HQs in New Delhi (which is time consuming and will drag down the tempo of battle, possibly leading to loss of initiative). What's more is that given the geometric rise in the pace of warfare, penalties associated with procrastinated decision making will only increase.

In this context, one of the fallouts of networking has been the compression of the Observe, Orient, Decide and Act (OODA) loop¹. Operating inside the decision making cycle of the opposition is essential to snatch the initiative from him and keep him in a reactive mode. Admiral Mike Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when asked as to what would be the three most important tenets of warfare in the future replied 'speed, speed and speed'. With the increasing use of artificial intelligence married to the proliferation of autonomous vehicles, modern theorists are already referring to the phenomenon of 'battlefield singularity' wherein the OODA loop is compressed to near instantaneity thereby allowing engagements to proceed at machine speed². In such an environment, the task of the master orchestrator (theatre commander) becomes all the more critical and in his absence, it will be nigh impossible to get all the moving parts to function coherently within the time available. This is not to say that a battle cannot be won, but victory will certainly be a lot more expensive in terms of lives and resources.

A corollary of this argument is that effective theaterisation would require considerable amalgamation of existing AORs and the redrawing of boundaries. The underlying principle would need to be 'one front, one commander'. This



would require the necking down of the existing 13 single service operational commands and our single joint Andaman and Nicobar Command into three or possibly four theater commands.

The Resource Argument

Centralized control of the air force is essential for maximizing effects. Distribution of air assets in penny pockets amongst theater commands and subordinate formations will result in frittering away a powerful resource. Further, given the endurance and reach of today's aircraft, it is feasible for them to be launched from dispersed airfields spread across the AORs of adjacent commands. In the event of a two-front conflict, strategic aerial assets may require to be utilized in the AORs of more than one theatre. All these would create command and control problems in a theaterised structure.

No one doubts the requirement of centralized control of the air force. The question is whom should that centralized control rest with. Should it be with the Air Headquarters in New Delhi which would have to run the air campaign in relative isolation or should it rest with a theatre commander who, by virtue of having all the vectors under his command, would be much better placed to orchestrate their employment. Insofar as allocation of air assets is concerned, the Air Chief,

as a member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, would be central to this aspect of decision making. In doing so, it is not essential for allocated assets to be repositioned in the AOR of the concerned theatre commander. Operational control for meeting tasking requirements is adequate. This is not very different from the manner in which the IAF functions today with assets dispersed over five geographic commands. The only difference would be that the role of the AOCINC would be fulfilled by a theater commander assisted by a very capable Air Component Commander and his staff.

The Domain Knowledge Argument

The air battle is unique in its characteristics. It requires comprehensive domain knowledge that can only be acquired through years of experience in the field. It would therefore be difficult for a theater commander from another service to understand the intricacies of air warfare. Consequently, he may not be equipped with the skills to effectively employ the air assets placed at his disposal.

The theatre commander is responsible for orchestration of the battle at its highest level. In doing so, he will be advised by a competent staff with professionals from all arms and service. Further, the air campaign will essentially

be executed by an Air Component Commander who would probably be an Air Marshal, with the associated years of experience and domain knowledge. There will therefore be abundant professional advice available to ensure that air assets are employed in a competent manner. Undoubtedly, having a theater commander widely experienced in the conduct of joint operations would be a bonus but this will only happen with time as staff officers from joint headquarters rise to the position of senior leadership.

The Historical Argument

In all the battles that we have fought so far, save the 1962 war in which there was no IAF participation, we have done exceptionally well. As the old saying goes, if the system isn't broken, don't fix it. Where then lies the necessity for change?

While in no way trying to make light of the deeds of our veterans who participated in earlier wars; with the exception of China, these were not fought against peer competitors. Further, it's been over four decades since we last fought a state-on-state conflict. Kargil did undoubtedly see robust kinetic action including participation by the air force. However, in the absence of a formal declaration of hostilities as also the self imposed restraint of fighting on only our side of the Line of

Control (LoC), the air battle was largely unopposed with the exception of the SHORAD threat. Warfare has changed significantly since 1971. Most nations have adapted their structures keeping in mind these changes. Regrettably, we remain an aberration. If failure in battle were to be the sole criteria for bringing about the necessary consensus for change, then we would be doomed to contend with embarrassing and costly losses at regular intervals.

The Disruption Argument

Given the size and dispersal of our armed forces, a major structural change of this nature would be highly disruptive. It could adversely impact combat readiness during the transition process, something we can ill afford given the ongoing security challenges we are faced with.

This amounts to kicking the can down the road by essentially saying 'not on my watch'. However, if the bullet has to be bitten, the pain involved in doing so will only increase with time. The cost of procrastination, high as it is, could even be higher if we were to be tried in combat with our fighting efficiency impaired by structural impediments. A better approach to adopt would be to accept the inevitability of restructuring and to use our ingenuity in trying to minimise the consequent disruption. One means of doing so could be by



adopting a phased approach. In the first phase, the AORs of the commands of the three services could be redrawn, making them collinear. Phase two could involve the collocation of headquarters of overlapping commands. Phase three could be theaterisation and the setting up of joint headquarters. In doing so, we would have to adopt and adhere to strict timelines and guard against the process being derailed midway.

The Misplaced Prioritization Argument

The problem does not lie in integration amongst the three services. Our Higher Defence Organization (HDO) is in good shape with excellent relations between senior commanders. The real issue is MoD-Service Headquarter integration which comes under the realm of Civil Military Relations (CMR). We are wasting time barking up the wrong tree.

CMR is undoubtedly a pressing issue that impacts the armed forces, particularly insofar as policy and procurement issues are concerned. The open ended timelines of our acquisitions is testimony to this. Some steps such as the creation of the Defence Policy Committee chaired by the National Security Advisor (NSA) have been taken to hasten the decision making process by adopting an inter-agency collegiate approach³. However, while robust CMR

with greater integration between the MoD and Service Headquarters will improve defence preparedness, its impact on the actual conduct of operations is small. On the other hand, integrated commands have the potential to radically change if not revolutionize the way we execute operations. Thus while both have their place, reforming our HDO, to my mind needs to occupy pride of place.

The other issue pertains to relations between senior military commanders. While in no way commenting upon the strength of these bonds, the execution of joint warfare cannot be resident on such relationships. In any event, in the heat of battle with each commander clamouring for more resources, these relationships will but naturally come under stress. Our structures therefore have to be robust enough to ensure that even in the event of a breakdown of personal bonds; the impact on the execution of joint operations is miniscule.

The Hidden Argument

The Air Force has five CinC level billets compared to six of the Army and three of the Navy with area responsibilities. Theaterisation would result in amalgamation of existing commands thereby cutting down their number from 14 to possibly four. In this process, while all the three services will be impacted, the

IAF could emerge with the short end of the stick with the most to lose.

This is the 800 pound gorilla in the room which often unites the three services in opposing theaterisation. Understandably, opposition from the IAF is the most vehement. This is, however, an issue that the three services have firstly to resolve amongst themselves and thereafter take up with the government so as to ensure that there would be no/minimal dilution in status/precedence of appointments with the adoption of theaterisation. Be that as it may, it would be better if the implementation of reforms and the associated HR issues were delinked. To impede structural reform and the consequent enhancement of combat capability just to ensure that pay and perks of a few are not diluted is disingenuous and does not go down well with our oath that the nation comes first, always and every time.

Conclusion

It can thus be seen that the reasons for opposing theaterisation are numerous. However, to my mind, most of them are based on misplaced apprehensions. Air power and the IAF are going to be central to any future conflict. In fact, one can make the argument that the reliance on air power will only increase with time. With land boundaries having more or less stabilized, the fixation on capture of territory at great expense is

passé. More often than not, territorial spoils will have to be returned through negotiations, which could be of dubious utility as we have witnessed in our own past. However, if one of the underlying aims of warfare is to enhance the power differential that exists between two nations, then destruction of war waging potential and infrastructure becomes central to conflict. Bridges, factories, power stations, shipyards, airfield and refineries once broken remain broken until considerable resources are burnt in fixing them. In such a battle, the IAF with its tremendous strike capabilities will occupy centre stage.

By continuing to stress on a 'do it alone' command structure, the IAF has only harmed itself. It has resulted in a weakening of trust with the other two services who have attempted to resolve the issue by investing into integral air power. As a consequence, the IAF lost the maritime reconnaissance mission in 1976⁴, the assets being transferred to the Navy. In 1986, the Army set up its own Aviation Corps and took over the air observation post mission⁵. Their fleet strength has grown considerably over the years. As recently as in Feb 2018, a Letter of Request (LOR) has been issued by the Government of India for the purchase of six additional Apache helicopters for the Army⁶. With this acquisition, even the attack helicopter mission will progressively come under



the ambit of the Army. This chipping away of IAF roles will continue until the fundamental issue of trust is addressed. For doing so, the IAF would need to embrace the deepening of its integration with the other two services rather than back-peddle on this relationship. When it comes to theaterisation, the IAF should logically be its biggest votary for in all likelihood; it will also be the biggest beneficiary.

(Endnotes)

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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES (CENJOWS)

Kashmir House, Rajaji Marg, New Delhi-110 011

Tele. No. : 011-23792446, 23006535, 23006538/9 | **Fax** : 011-23792444

Website : <https://cenjows.gov.in> | **E-mail** : cenjows@yahoo.com