

**UNIFIED COMMANDS IN THE INDIAN
ARMED FORCES: IMPERATIVE FOR
INTEGRATED WAR FIGHTING**

An Issue Brief

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By

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General

The remarkable technological advancements in science and technology in the later part of 20th century have revolutionized the art of war fighting. The nature of warfare itself has witnessed a paradigm shift in planning and execution of operations, post First Gulf War in early 1990s. The contours of modern war fighting were aptly defined and demonstrated in the Operation Desert Storm executed by the International Coalition Forces under the leadership of USA.

In a technology driven era, characterized by Revolution in Military Affairs, the modern concept of war fighting has witnessed a complete transformation, relies on the tenets of real time battle field transparency 24 x 7, swift all weather mobility under all battle field conditions and immense lethality of fire power independent of range limitations. The modern day wars will be fought with simultaneity in a non-linear pattern across the spectrum of land, sea and air. The execution of operations would entail well coordinated offensive - defensive maneuvers, net-centric operations, information warfare, cyber attacks, possibly under nuclear overhang et al. To achieve success in such a battle field milieu, demands synergistic application of military power, under a Combined Arms Concept. In such a complex operational environment, militaries have little option but to adopt methods of integrated war fighting.

Seamless integrated war fighting is the mantra for success in any future conflict. To ensure jointness, a military needs to undertake wide ranging reforms, both at the operational and organisational levels. Unified structures have been put in place by all major militaries in the world over to optimize their war fighting capabilities. However, India has been debating the issue for far too long without any action, despite facing a wide variety of threats to its internal as well as external security.

India, a rapidly emerging regional cum global power is endowed with the fourth largest Armed Forces in the world, is confronted with very nebulous challenging security environment in the region. India's plethora of security threats include two hostile nuclear neighbors, posing a collusive threat, Pak sponsored terror in J&K as part of instrument of state power, LWE in almost half the districts in the country and international power play unfolding in the IOR as well as Asia-Pacific Regions. Apart from safeguarding the national interests, India today, as an economic & military power, has an obligation to play a much larger role in the evolving geo-strategic environment in the region, particularly in the maritime domain. To effectively counter plethora of security challenges, it is imperative for India to integrate the Armed Forces, by adopting Unified Commands Concept. Yet, India has not been very open to military transformation. The reluctance to implement the proposal by both the political establishment as well as military has inordinately delayed the much needed transformation of the Armed Forces.

India's technological, doctrinal and organizational structures need to be redefined in tune with the evolving geo-strategic environment and the threats faced by the nation. Presently, the responsibility to deal with Pakistan wrests with four Army commands, two Air force Commands and one Naval Command. Similarly, three Army Commands and three Air Force Commands deal with the Chinese threat. To complicate the issue further, India has still not appointed the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), despite having accepted its necessity more than a decade

ago. In contrast, all developed and emerging major powers across the globe have focused on military transformation and undertaken doctrinal and organizational changes to ensure better integration and synergy amongst their armed forces.

Jointness and its Implications

To discuss the issue of jointness, one must first understand its meaning and implications. Conceptually, jointness implies synergized and integrated employment of resources of the three services to achieve the desired results in the least possible time. The primary aim is to avoid duplication of effort, ensure seamless integration and optimum employment of available resources. Whilst, jointness is a universally accepted concept in modern day warfare, the methodology of achieving it varies from nation to nation.

The American Doctrine for its Armed Forces describes it as; Jointness implies cross-service combination wherein the capability of the joint force is understood to be synergistic, with the sum greater than its parts (the capability of individual components). It further states that joint forces require high levels of interoperability and systems that are conceptualised and designed with joint architectures and acquisition strategies. This level of interoperability reduces technical, doctrinal and cultural barriers that limit the ability of joint force commanders to achieve objectives. The goal is to employ joint forces effectively across the range of military operations. What does it seek to achieve? Firstly, based on unity of effort, jointness seeks to focus all the energy of armed forces across the range of military operations, throughout all levels of war, in every environment toward enhancing the effectiveness of military operations. Secondly, joint forces provide commanders with multidimensional capabilities (land, sea, air, space and, special operations) that are more effective than uni-service forces by providing a wider range of operational and tactical options. Finally, multiple service capabilities allow an innovative commander to combine joint capabilities in asymmetrical as well as symmetrical ways

to produce a total military impact that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Jointness in real sense entails integration of individual services to achieve a composite whole. It implies enmeshing the three services together at different levels and placing them under one commander for execution of operational plans. The creation of a dedicated resource is meant to be employed by the commander in the manner he deems appropriate to achieve the best results. It assumes that the theatre commander is well-versed with the operational imperatives of the various dimensions of battle, the land, the sea & the air and understands the employment of all three Services components operating under his command. In an integrated set up, the theatre commander is vested the requisite all arms resources and enjoys over-riding authority, to achieve the desired objectives.

To introduce transformation of Armed Forces in the Indian context, usher jointness in the real sense, two major obstacles need to be overcome. Firstly, there is a need to change the mindset in the military hierarchy, which is a major challenge. There is a deep rooted insecurity among the Services, arising out of loss of absolute authority over its Service, loss of identity of each Service in an integrated set up and erosion of empire within each Service. Though the apprehensions may be partially true, the stand alone functioning of each Service is detrimental to the overall organization interests. Apropos, Services would be unwilling to accept integration in totality, as has been the case with Armed Forces world over, which were compelled by a political mandate to adopt the model of Unified Commands. The decision perforce has to be top driven, thrust on the Armed Forces through a political legislation. Secondly, the political set up, though convinced about the requirement of integration of the Armed Forces, the political will has been vacillating in taking such a bold decision, reluctance arising out of insecurity to bestow the complete authority of Armed Forces with one individual. The political apprehensions may not be true, as

prevailing military organizational structures and ethos in the Indian context, make it very difficult to manipulate the Armed Forces against the political set up.

Unified Commands in Other Countries

To consider the issue of 'unified war-fighting' in the Indian context, it would be pragmatic to look at the experiences of the USA and Chinese Armed Forces ; US being a global power with immense capability and the Chinese as an evolving military power.

The American Experience

The transformation of US Armed Forces ; one of the most integrated militaries in the world merits analysis. Post World War II, US President Harry Truman noted ; We must never fight another war the way we fought the last two. I have a feeling that if the Army and Navy had fought our enemies as hard as they fought each other, the war would have ended much earlier. Truman's observation was an indictment of the US military's inability to collaborate effectively in the principal theatre of war. Over the next few years, the US armed forces were to undertake a firm conceptual turn towards integrated war-fighting. By 1958, President Eisenhower, a strong proponent of unified commands, felt that the days of separate land, sea and air warfare were over,¹⁵ and that the complete unification of all military planning and combat forces and commands was a rank essential. He proposed that the Congress enact the Department of Defence Reorganization Act of 1958, amending the National Security Act of 1947 authorizing the President, acting through the Secretary of Defense and with the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), to establish unified and specified commands, to assign missions to them, and to determine their force structure.

Based on their experience, the defence reforms in the US have been continuously evolving with the passage of National Security Act 1947, followed by Department of Defence Reorganization

Act of 1958, and the landmark Goldwater Nichols Act, 1986 (GNA) which was passed by the US Congress as a new vision for joint warfare planning and theatre command concept. It was the GNA that actually ushered in true integration. The combatant commanders that came about as a result of the GNA were immensely successful. The US armed forces operated seamlessly in operations after the Cold War like Operation Desert Storm (Iraq, 1991) and Operation Deliberate Force (Bosnia, 1995). The GNA has also elevated the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) to the principal military advisor to the President, the National Security Council (NSC) and the Secretary of Defense. It allows the Chairman the authority and discretion 'as he considers appropriate' to consult with the chiefs and the Combatant Commanders (CCDRs) before rendering his military advice.

China

With growing aspiration to be a global power, the Chinese Armed Forces have introduced major restructuring of their command and control structures to meet modern joint warfare requirements. In the last decade, the major evolution in strategy and operations have involved a shift from 'Joint Operations (JO)' to 'Integrated Joint Operations (IJO)'. The JO places emphasis on individual service divisions and command chains are vertical, where as IJO legislates that service divisions do not matter when command chains can be 'flat' due to the leveling power of digital command, control and sensor systems.

The major restructuring includes transition from military regions to battle zones towards development of joint operations capability. The joint commands would be created in Jinan, Nanjing and Guangzhou Military Regions over a five-year period, followed by consolidation of

the remaining four MRs into two joint commands. At the forefront of the reforms is the replacement of four general departments of the CMC with 15 new departments, signaling not only a

change in name but also a complete transfer of functions. It also represents a demotion for the four general departments. The General Staff Department (GSD), for instance, used to be known as the number one organ in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), partly because it was in charge of operations and intelligence, including human, electronic and Internet intelligence, and partly because it was in command of the army, which, in turn, controlled the seven military regions across the country. The GSD has now become the CMC Joint General Staff Department, with its original intelligence units and functions integrated into the new Strategic Support Force (SSF). It no longer exercises operational control of the army, which now has its own headquarters. The new Joint General Staff Department will function purely as a staff organization, similar to the joint chiefs of staff system of the U.S. PLA has also decided to make the commanders of the Navy, Air Force and the Second Artillery permanent members of the Central Military Commission's high command.

The Second Artillery Corps has been renamed as Rocket Force. What's noteworthy is that it is similar to Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces, albeit with some differences. The Russian equivalent controls all of the long and medium range ballistic missiles in Russia. China has assigned aerospace development to the SSF, not the Rocket Force. The arrangement was most likely made to enable the air force to take the lead in aerospace development, a move toward the realization of the much-stressed "integrated air and space" strategy. To achieve superiority in space, China might itself opt to establish a separate Space Force. The Rocket Force currently controls all of the country's intercontinental, medium and short range ballistic missiles.

The biggest change in the functions of General Political Department (GDP) is the removal of its control over the military legal system to the new Politics and Law Commission. It signifies a breaking up of the discipline, security, and personnel functions that GDP used to monopolize. The Politics and Law Commission,

together with the Discipline Inspection Commission, can stop personnel functions from being controlled by a single agency while contributing to the goal of rooting out corruption in the military

India : Adoption of Integrated System

India is a rapidly emerging regional cum global power. The world looks at India, as a balancing power in the geo-strategic space in the IOR as well as Asia-Pacific Regions. Thus, apart from protecting its national interests, India is vested with huge security obligations to play its rightful role in the dynamic international power play in the region. It is imperative for the Indian Armed Forces to graduate from service specific approach to an integrated system which avoids duplication, ensures unity of command, promotes economy of effort, enables optimization of resources, ensures greater integration and jointness. This could be achieved only through restructuring of our forces in to unified commands. An integrated system aims to put all resources of the three services at the disposal of a theatre commander who will carry out the task in consonance with the legislated overall national aim.

There is little doubt for India to adopt an integrated system but yet critics often point out that powers like the US have global interests that demand a unified military structure, whereas India is focused primarily on its territorial integrity, there is no need for the integrated theatre command system. However, this argument is rather flawed. Integration is aimed at a speedy, effective and synergetic application of forces in a combat environment. The tools of modern warfare ; combat forces, air assets, surveillance assets, cyber systems, space-based weapons, et al can be best be exploited to an advantage in an integrated command structure than in any other organisation. It gives a commander a clear idea of his capabilities and limitations, thus ensuring pragmatic employment of resources to achieve success. The prerequisite for an effective functioning of integrated commands is the issue of the acquisition of domain

knowledge of other services and their integrated application. Not only the commanders, but the staff as well must understand the functioning in an integrated set up. There will be a need to give much greater emphasis on joint training amongst the Services.

Evolution of the Concept of Unified Commands in India

The concept of 'unified command in the Indian Armed Forces' is not a recent phenomenon. In 1976, India established the unified 'Fortress Andaman and Nicobar (FORTAN)', under the Navy, accepting the basic principles of Services integration. The Army placed an infantry battalion and, subsequently, a brigade under the Fortress commander. The IAF, on the other hand, stationed its units under one of the IAF commands on the mainland with a liaison unit in the Fortress HQ.

Kargil Conflict threw up major shortcomings in our security set up, military leaders and defence experts called for drastic changes to the existing system. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) and the Group of Ministers (GoM) reports highlighted several deficiencies in India's security management system and recommended certain measures to be undertaken. Of all the recommendations made by the GoM report, three most important are ; integration of the services with one another as well as with the Ministry of Defence (MoD); the creation of a chief of defence staff (CDS); and joint operational commands.

Whilst, the speedy transformation of the Armed Forces was well understood and acknowledged, however, the implementation was restricted to creation of ANC and establishment of SFC. Other major issues remain unaddressed, adversely impacting integration of the Armed Forces.

Current Structure in India

India has a total of 19 commands: seven army commands (of which six are operational); seven air force commands (of which five are operational); three naval commands (of which

two are operational), and two joint commands. None of these are co-located and their geographical responsibilities have little commonality. In most cases, the command of one service overlaps or is linked with two or more commands of sister services. In contrast, the US which has a global role has a total of nine combat commands that include three functional combatant commands ; Special Operations Command, Strategic Command and Transportation Command; and six geographic combat commands ; Africa Command, Central Command, European Command, Northern Command, Pacific Command, and Southern Command.

The Indian Navy has its own complement of air power, including fighters. However, in the case of the Army, integral air resources are limited to utility helicopters ; though medium lift helicopters, attack helicopters, and transport aircraft have a predominant role with the Army, they are actually held by the IAF. The IAF has its Advance Headquarters with each Army Command and Maritime Air Operations with the Navy. At the level of corps headquarters, the IAF has a Tactical Air Centre allocated to each corps. However, this organization precludes complete integration and cohesion between the services and can be overcome by adopting the concept of unified commands. Unified commands would remove additional layers and improve interface between the commanders, resulting in flatter structures, promote better planning, speedy decision making as well as execution.

Unified Commands: Recommended Model for India

Creation of Additional Functional Commands. The Indian Armed Forces are in the process of creating three new tri-service commands, albeit in an incremental manner: Cyber command, Aerospace command, and Special Operations command. The creation of Cyber Command will be preceded by Defence Cyber Agency and Aerospace Command by Defence Aerospace Agency. This indeed is a step in the right direction. However, there is a need to expedite the process for early implementation. Likewise, there is an inevitable requirement to raise a Joint Logistics Command.

Joint Logistics Command. In the existing system each service plans its own logistics following its own planning, provisioning, transportation and delivery model. This has resulted in tremendous amount of duplication, long inventories and a colossal waste of precious resources that goes against the very ethos of efficient economy. It is imperative that the logistics organizations of the three services are integrated to ensure optimization of resources. The UK Chief of Defence Material, US Defence Logistics Agency, and the Chinese Integrated Logistics System have functioned very efficiently and India too needs to create a Joint Logistics Command.

Cyber Warfare Command. Cyber warfare would constitute a vital component of any future war. The future operations will be conducted in the backdrop of cyber warfare, information dominance and high-tech conditions which would necessitate synchronization of all resources for better synergy and utilization. The process for raising Cyber Command is already underway, though in an incremental manner, needs to be implemented expeditiously. However, a common communication grid for the three services needs to be engineered to enhance inter operability and facilitate joint operations.

Special Forces Command. Indian Armed Forces hold a large complement of Special Forces (SF), though under respective Services. The SFs constitute a strategic component of any military force. It is are a very potent asset and their employment needs to be synergized and thus merits creating an integrated Special Forces Command. SF are usually assigned close combat missions which afford us a strategic advantage. With the advent of PGMs, SF can offer overwhelming advantage by engaging targets deep inside enemy territory, usually by using laser target identification.

Aerospace Command In any future conflict, the aerospace dimension would play a very critical role in shaping the outcome of the conflict. The side which controls and optimally exploits the aerospace would undoubtedly be the dominant player. The

utilization of aerospace for military operations would increase manifold in the near future, there is a need to create a single agency to control and synergise the employment of this vital asset in furtherance of our military objectives. The importance of aerospace dimension in the modern warfare was amply demonstrated in the Gulf War. The Indian Armed Forces have commenced the process of raising an Aerospace Command, albeit in an incremental manner, which needs to be expedited. The raising of a Defence Aerospace Agency as a prelude to raising an Aerospace Command is a welcome pragmatic step in the right direction. We could study the US model where Space Command into the Strategic Command have been merged.

Geographical Theatre Commands

The unified command structure is recommended to be based on geographical theatres catering to the envisaged threats, duly supported by the functional commands. It will specifically cater for threats from Pakistan, China, IOR and internal security. The geographical theatre commands would include the Northern Theatre, Western Theatre, Eastern Theatre and IOR Theatres.

Northern Theatre. This would comprise the existing Northern Command and requisite elements of the Western Air Command, primarily to look after the state of J&K including counter terrorism operations. This region mandates a separate theatre to counter collusive threat from China & Pakistan, spiraling spread and influence of ISIS in the region as well as Pak sponsored terror as an instrument of state power.

Western Theatre. It will comprise the existing Western Command, South Western and Southern Commands of Army, Western and South Western Air Commands of IAF, primarily oriented towards Pakistan. A requisite naval complement also needs to be allocated to this theatre.

Eastern Theatre This would comprise the Eastern Command of Army and the Eastern Air Command of IAF predominantly aligned

to counter Chinese threat. Its responsibility would encompass borders with China in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and the entire North-East. Accordingly, the forces would need to be reorbated.

Indian Ocean Region Theatres. The IOR has gained significance importance due to global geo-strategic centre of gravity shifting towards the IOR and Asia-Pacific Regions. The future global power play in the decades ahead, would be centered around this region due to major sea lanes of communication transiting through this region as well as China's expansionist cum hegemonic designs unfolding evil designs. IOR needs to be a separate theatre in view of its growing importance strategic importance ; emerging maritime as well as non-traditional security threats and our commercial interests. It could encompass two separate theatres ; IOR (West) and IOR (East). It would include elements of the Southern Command of Army, Southern Air Command, Western Naval Command, Eastern Naval Command and ANC, aligned to undertake operations in the IOR and cater for maritime threats.

OOAC Role. Whilst, a lot is talked about creating a separate Reserve Command, but our benign foreign policy which focuses merely on protecting national interests devoid of any hegemonic designs, may preclude such an option. However, undertaking OOAC tasks remains a necessity in the future ahead. The task could be accomplished by nominating dual tasked forces from various theatres, which could be placed under a requisite theatre as per requirement. Adopting the model of countries like US may not be required in our context, rather forging strategic alliances and partnerships with FFCs would be a more pragmatic answer to the emerging threats in the 21st century. The elements from Special Forces Command could be coopted as part of the force as per requirement.

Proposed Model for Implementation

The reorganization of existing commands into unified commands would entail a massive restructuring exercise. The moot question, can we take this transformational decision? It demands unflinching support & commitment from the Services, rising above narrow loyalties, attributing primacy to national interests and political will to revolutionise our Armed Forces to align with our future emerging threats. Whilst, the implementation may be on an incremental manner to absorb the imminent turbulence, we need to take the bold step without any further delay. Our Armed Forces are resilient and have the sagacity to absorb the idea. India already has a model for theatre command in terms of ANC and SFC as functional command, and the same could be used for raising new functional and theatre commands. The restructuring could be carried in a phased manner within specific timelines. An appropriate timeframe can be worked out after the proposal is approved. We need to understand that even US and UK took four-five decades to evolve into their respective present systems and are still undergoing transformation; the Chinese began the process in the 1990s while Australia and Canada have also taken around three to four decades. Learning from others experience, India could achieve the transformation in a comparatively lesser timeframe. The recommended implementation roadmap is as follows :-

Phase I The first phase would include the appointment of CDS and raising functional commands under the CDS.

Phase II In the second phase should constitute the Theatre Commands which can be organized with comparative ease of re-orbatting forces. The recommended commands are as follows :-

Northern Theatre Command could be established, since it does not entail large re-orbatting of resources. The Command would primarily constitute of Army component with dedicated small IAF component.

IOR Theatre Commands; IOR (East) & IOR (West) Theatre Commands could be established by re-orbatting necessary forces from respective Services. The Commands would primarily comprise Naval component with limited dedicated resources from the Army and IAF.

Phase III In the next phase, Eastern Theatre Command could be established. The Command would constitute primarily of Army component with dedicated resources from IAF.

Overall, there would be a major reduction in the staff, since 19 commands would be restructured into five theatre commands and five functional commands. The staff authorized to the component commanders will be much lesser due to availability of staff at the theatre level. This would result in significant equipment and manpower savings, apart from better planning, coordination and conduct of operations.

Conclusion

India, is a rapidly emerging regional cum global power, the world looks to India, as a balancing power in the geo-strategic space in the IOR as well as Asia-Pacific Regions. Thus, apart from protecting its national interests, India is vested with security obligations to play its rightful role in the dynamic international power play in the region. Jointness and integration of the military is an inevitable requirement for the modern day battlefield. The principles underlying these features are inter-service cooperation and economy of effort, both of which are crucial to war-fighting. Unified Commands would enable better joint planning and coordination, quicker decision-making based on appropriate advice from specialists, and the optimal utilization of technology and other resources.

The biggest challenge to jointness is to introduce an attitudinal change by transforming the sense of insecurity and mutual

suspicion into a sense of belongingness amongst the services as well as the politico-bureaucratic establishment. The change has to be implemented top down for it to take root and be effective. This necessitates a strong political will and India's political leadership has to enforce the necessary reforms by enacting the required legislation. Any further delay will only be at the peril of its national security. National interest should remain supreme and not be compromised due to service parochialism and politico-bureaucratic hurdles.