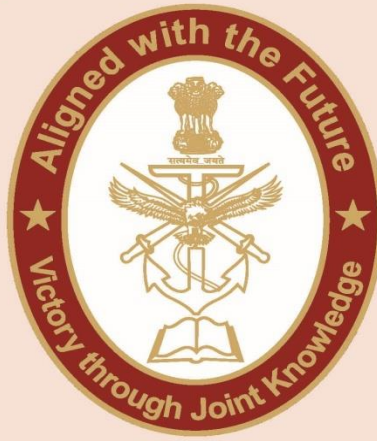


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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EVOLVING THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF TRI-SERVICES APPROACH



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A much-awaited decision on appointment of the first CDS of the country was announced by the PM¹ from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Delhi on 15 Aug 2019 which was thereafter followed by appointment of Gen Bipin Rawat as India's first CDS on 01 Jan 2020² after his superannuation on 31 Dec 2019.

As a single point advisor to the Government, he was expected to bring in convergence in the functioning of all the three services. He also had two major tasks as under in addition to a host of other tasks:-

- Create restructured theatre commands³ to bring in effective jointness in operations.
- Since the three services have been working in their own silos, the mandate⁴ also included bringing in jointness in logistics

¹<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-narendra-modi-announces-chief-of-defence-staff-independence-day-speech-1581006-2019-08-15>

²<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=196194>

³<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=188022>

support, communication, training and MRO support besides all those other issues having overlaps. Optimisation and effectiveness were to be the key considerations.

As part of the deliberations, the following theatre commands⁵ were being considered as against the seventeen theatre commands currently existing in the Army, Navy and Air Force altogether:-

- Western Theatre Command (WTC)⁶. Land based, Army led and proposed to be located at Jaipur, this theatre command will be responsible for Pakistan and/ or threats emanating on our Western front.
- Eastern Theatre Command (ETC)⁷. Land based, Army led and tentatively proposed to be located at Lucknow, this theatre command will be responsible for China and/or any threat emanating from Northern and/or Eastern borders. These two Army-led commands will replace the currently existing seven Army commands.
- Maritime Theatre Command (MTC)⁸. This will be responsible for peninsular India both on the Western as well as the Eastern seaboard and is likely to include ANC and other tri-services assets in its geographical coverage. It will be Navy-led and thus Navy will have one exclusive theatre command as against three Naval commands. There is also a possibility of ANC not being part of this command.

⁴Ibid

⁵Ibid

⁶<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/proposed-integrated-theatre-commands-what-we-know-so-far-7374555/>

⁷Ibid

⁸Ibid

- Air Defence Command (ADC)⁹. Planned to be IAF-led with tentative location at Prayagraj, it has run into multiple problems due to inter-services issues. There is a definite need to strengthen the land forces commander with all air defence assets placed under him whereas strategic AF assets should continue with the IAF. Whether there should be a separate space command or a single command to have strategic assets of Air Force as well as space assets is a matter of detail. Currently, space aspects are being handled by Defence Space Agency (DSA)¹⁰. Its reformulation as a separate command, amalgamation with IAF led command or the present model being continued will also emerge in due course.

In addition to the above, there are new configurations which may emerge based upon operational and functional needs of all the three services. Some inputs about these are as under:-

- Strategic Forces Command (SFC)¹¹. This is an integrated command that already exists. As we go ahead, this field will have larger constituents with large numbers of long-range vectors, hypersonic missiles and nuclear capable missiles being part of it. It may continue in its present form, or some modifications might be implemented once the four theatre commands discussed above are operational and stabilised.
- Defence Cyber Agency (DCA)¹². The importance of this threat is increasing with every passing day. This is one threat that exists both in peace and war. Not only this – both friendly and adversarial countries use cyber tools for furtherance of their aims. A number of such cyber-attacks may remain covert as well. Its impact can be gauged from the ongoing conflict

⁹Ibid

¹⁰<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-military-capabilities-space-drdo-dsa-sensors-satellites-1784084-2021-03-26>

¹¹https://web.archive.org/web/20130511032234/http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2002-12-30/india/27320878_1_nuclear-command-sfc-strategic-forces-command

¹²<https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/india-set-to-have-defence-cyber-agency-in-may-rear-admiral-mohit-to-be-its-first-chief20190430102739/>

between Russia and Ukraine wherein Russia paralysed¹³the entire communication network of Ukraine within twenty-four hours of commencing hostilities. Had Elon Musk not intervened to provide communications to Ukraine in time, the outcome of this conflict would have been entirely different. Whether the current structure and earmarked resources with DCA are adequate, or it requires to be upgraded to full-fledged command is a matter of detail. Given Chinese technological advancements and its persistent collusion with Pakistan, upgrading DCA is a critical operational as well as functional necessity.

- Special Operations Division (SDO)¹⁴. This is a positive development wherein all the resources have been operationally put under one command and control setup. Two aspects are important – one, its size needs to be enhanced without compromising its operational exclusiveness. There may be a case for constituting some friendship divisions¹⁵ for our neighbourhood containing disaster management elements, logistics elements and experts from different domains. The exact contours of such friendship divisions will need to be worked out.

In addition to the above aspects, there is an urgent need of a logistics command as well as Training Command to make the forces battle ready all the time. Whether a centralised model will work for such geographically dispersed assets or a decentralised model with unified command will be the way out, will emerge once full implementation is undertaken.

Since Integrated Battle Groups are also being constituted and therefore doing away with current seventeen theatre commands and replacing them with reconstituted tri-services operational, functional and joint commands may bring in a lot of turbulence when troops are face to face on LAC in Eastern Ladakh. The conflict escalation may take place anytime with more

¹³<https://newsable.asianetnews.com/world/cyberattacks-paralyse-ukraine-amid-russian-precision-strikes-r7srbw>

¹⁴<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-begins-setting-up-new-tri-service-agencies-to-handle-special-operations-space-and-cyberspace/articleshow/69346012.cms>

¹⁵<https://chanakyaforum.co/3zaff07>

than fifty thousand¹⁶ troops having been mobilised by both sides. Stalemate in the 16th round of Corps Commander level meet held on 17 Jul 2022 indicates the possibility of conflict escalation in days ahead. It is therefore essential that this planned transition is kept smooth. The idea of rolling out planned theatre commands initially to take over the existing commands before they are done away with, might turn out to be a better idea. The non-inclusion of Udhampur based Northern Command due to the exceptional dynamics of J&K is a progressive approach and this can be appropriately subsumed in times to come when there is reasonable stability in the proposed theatre commands.

A smooth, well-thought-out transition will be the best model. However, there are numerous challenges to it. The challenges have got somewhat more intense in the absence of no one holding the appointment of CDS after the sudden demise of Gen Bipin Rawat in a helicopter crash. All the stakeholders of all the three services need to sit together all over again and deliberate upon the proposed theaterisation model including review where needed as these organisations have to perform in the Indian context of threat spectrum. Evolving of fresh building blocks is critical as these changes are the watershed moment in the history of the nation and therefore, a pragmatic approach in the national interest is a must as against furthering of individual service-based approach.

CERTIFICATE

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

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¹⁶<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-shifts-50-000-troops-to-china-border-in-historic-move-11624838652165.html>