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# THE GENERAL BETWEEN TWO ERAS: HOW GENERAL ANIL CHAUHAN NAVIGATED INDIA'S TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL MILITARY POWER TO NETWORKED WARFARE

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**The General Between Two Eras: How General Anil Chauhan Navigated India's Transition from Traditional Military Power to Networked Warfare**



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In military history, commanders are often remembered for the wars they have fought and won or the territories they have defended. But some leaders etch their name in history not because they won a war that defined a generation but because they prepared their country for a war yet to come. General Anil Chauhan, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, belongs to that category. His appointment as the second CDS, a position established in 2019 to bring tri-service integration under a single, cohesive strategic leadership, unprecedented in India's military history, came at a period when the very character of warfare was evolving at a remarkable pace in India.

General Chauhan took over the reins of command when technological disruption, geopolitical competition, and new operational doctrines were making their mark in the global security landscape. The definition of military power, traditionally defined by the number of troops, territory, and conventional weaponry, was facing the threat from new areas of warfare related to artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, cyber network-centric, and information warfare. The 21st-century battlefield is no longer bounded by mountains, deserts, or maritime spaces but has extended into data networks, satellites, and the cognitive space of human minds.

At this time, India found itself on a steep climb. While adjusting to quickly shifting threat perceptions in continental and maritime theatres, the defence forces were striving for integration and jointness. In such a scenario, the tenure of General Chauhan was a

consequential one, and it stood as a reflection of his efforts to lead a larger military transition at a pivotal moment in India's strategic history.

As General Chauhan's term draws to its close, the bigger question is not what he changed but whether he prepared India for wars that are yet to take place.

### **The soldier from a conventional military era**

Before General Anil Chauhan became associated with conversations about AI, autonomous systems, and the evolving nature of warfare, he was a soldier moulded by the traditional military age. Commissioned into the 11 Gorkha Rifles,<sup>1</sup> his early career was shaped by persistent difficulties stemming from insurgencies and regional instability, as well as conventional threats. His ideas about strategy were influenced by the experiences and lessons of past wars and security conflicts. The legacy of the wars of 1965 and 1971, the Kargil conflict in 1999, and long-standing counterinsurgency campaigns in various theatres had strengthened the conventional deterrence and territorial security paradigm. Military capabilities were measured by soldier strength, supplies, and weaponry; borders were seen as distinct areas that needed to be protected, and command over physical terrain was crucial to operational success.

General Chauhan's own operational experiences reflected these realities. His deployment in the sensitive areas, particularly in northern and eastern theatres, exposed him to highly complex security environments that involved both conventional and sub-conventional challenges. He gained firsthand knowledge of how military force must be balanced against political realities from his experience in the Northeast,<sup>2</sup> which included long stints dealing with insurgent movements in a politically delicate operational environment. This knowledge would later influence his more comprehensive views on integrated national power. Tactical flexibility and leadership in an environment of uncertainty were the hallmark of counter-insurgency operations; meanwhile, a strategic dimension was becoming more prominent, which necessitated an increasing need for military responses to be linked with political and developmental considerations. These experiences created a new generation of officers who knew more than just the battlefields but understood the wider security landscape.

However, the security landscape surrounding General Chauhan was starting to change even as he rose through the ranks. Assumptions that had shaped military thinking for decades were increasingly called into question by technological advancements, shifting threat assessments, and the emergence of new operational domains. Years later, reflecting upon

these transformations, General Chauhan remarked that *“technology today is defining strategy and war-winning strategy.”*<sup>3</sup> This observation was not only an acknowledgement of technological innovation but also a sign of a change in the understanding of the nature of conflict as a whole.

### **Entering into a new era of military transition**

When General Anil Chauhan was appointed as the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of the Indian Armed Forces in September 2022, the global strategic context was undergoing a significant transformation. Military strength and territorial control were giving way to technological capabilities, information dominance, and multi-domain integration. At the same time, the boundaries between war and peace were becoming increasingly fluid, and the character of the conflict was shifting into a new operational conflict. Unmanned aerial systems (UAS), loitering munitions, satellite-enabled intelligence, and real-time surveillance all have an impact on the battlefield, and the Russia-Ukraine war in particular has become a significant case study in contemporary warfare. It turned into one of the first important battles in which low-cost drones and commercially available technologies drastically changed the course of operations. Military efficiency increasingly depended on information-driven operations, quick reaction, and precise targeting rather than just conventional force concentration.

In particular, drone warfare changed conventional military dynamics. Conventional beliefs about force dominance and procurement objectives were fundamentally challenged when low-cost drones worth a few thousand dollars were capable of neutralising military assets costing millions. Acknowledging this shift, General Chauhan described drones as *“low-cost, high-impact solutions”* and highlighted robotics, speed, and AI-enabled intelligence as key drivers shaping future battlefields. These lessons have direct strategic significance for India. India shares active, unsettled borders with two nuclear-armed neighbours, one of whom has shown a willingness to use technical asymmetry, proxy troops, and grey-zone tactics, in contrast to European countries watching Ukraine from a distance. The drone revolution was a direct warning rather than a far-off case study.

The role of cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, space assets, and information ecosystems became a more and more important part of the national security strategy. This makes it all the more fitting that General Chauhan has said that *“future wars will span land, sea, air, cyber, and cognitive domains.”*<sup>4</sup> He has repeatedly argued that technological disruption was changing the very character of conflict, describing the current period as the

“third revolution” in warfare. Similarly, acknowledging the strategic importance of space, he warned that *“if we fail in space, we will be forced to fight blind; if we dominate in space, we will fight with foresight.”*<sup>5</sup>

These changes were more than just technological in nature for India. They demanded a rethinking of doctrine, integration of the forces, and even military thinking itself. Hence, General Chauhan's job was not just to integrate new technologies into current systems but also to prepare the Indian defence forces for a strategic environment where information superiority, quickness of decision-making, and adaptability to technology are becoming key drivers of military effectiveness.

### **Beyond Structures: Transforming the military perspective**

General Anil Chauhan faced more than just organisational reorganisation and new command structures. Changing how the defence forces view warfare itself was a more difficult undertaking, even if talks about the Chief of Defence Staff frequently centred on theatre commands and institutional improvements. Policy can be used to accomplish structural changes, but a more profound change in perspective is needed to reform military culture.

India's defence forces have historically developed into extremely competent but primarily service-specific organisations, with the Army, Navy, and Air Force each creating its own operational doctrines, command structures, and priorities. This worked adequately when warfare remained confined to distinct, separable domains. But these lines are often blurred in modern wars. Even though future operations may entail simultaneous use of land, air, maritime, cyber, and space operations, coordination and integration will be critical and not an option.

Recognising this shift, General Chauhan repeatedly emphasised that *“jointness is not merely about structures but about creating synergy among different capabilities.”* His understanding was that while organisation can be integrated, it is also necessary to have shared planning, doctrine, and decision-making for it to be effective and efficient.

Institutional arrangements for this shift started by 2019 with the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA)<sup>6</sup> and the establishment of the CDS framework to enhance coordination, efficient use of resources, and joint planning. India also introduced multi-services exercises like Tiger Triumph for interoperability, along with the establishment

of integrated organisations like the Armed Forces Special Operations Division, Defence Space Agency, and Defence Cyber Agency. After being operationalised under this more comprehensive framework, the Defence Cyber Agency started combining India's offensive and defensive cyber capabilities under tri-service supervision. This was a major change from the previous model, in which each service was responsible for managing its own digital infrastructure. Similarly, for the first time, the Defence Space Agency combined satellite-based information and space situational awareness under a single operational umbrella.

Long-standing service customs and conflicting operational agendas caused practical limitations even as technical advancements emphasised the necessity of integration. With a multifaceted security scenario in India, covering continental, maritime, cyber, and information security, the need for timely dissemination of information and joint action is growing.

It was more than a mere shift in administration; it was a shift in intellectual perspective on the nature of military power. The argument over theatre commands, where debates were more about which service would give a joint commander operational authority than location, was the best example of this cultural difficulty. Fundamentally, this was a struggle for institutional identity. In this evolving context, effectiveness is more dependent on the ability of these services to work together as a unified force more than on the strength of individual services.

### **Between Mass and Intelligence: Rethinking Military Power**

Military planners around the world were faced with a crucial challenge by the time General Anil Chauhan took over as CDS: what constitutes military strength in the twenty-first century? Traditional notions of force dominance were progressively called into question by modern conflicts, when accuracy, knowledge, and flexibility frequently started to outweigh mass and numerical might.

Embracing this change, General Chauhan stated that *“the future belongs to smaller, smarter, and more agile systems rather than simply bigger weapons.”*<sup>7</sup> During his tenure, however, he did more than spot trends. Emerging technology, domestic defence capabilities, and future operational readiness received more attention during his term. In FY 2023–2024, India produced almost ₹1.27 lakh crore worth of defence equipment, and its defence exports exceeded ₹21,000 crore,<sup>8</sup> indicating an increasing trend toward technological independence. Initiatives like the iDEX (Innovations for Defence Excellence) framework,

which by 2024 had enlisted over 400 startups to develop drone swarms, AI-enabled surveillance systems, and counter-UAS technologies, precisely the capabilities that modern battlefields demand, are a concrete illustration of India's shift toward indigenous technological self-reliance. The Army's 2024 induction of India's homegrown Nagastra-1<sup>9</sup> loitering munition marked a concrete step from ambition to operational reality. Strategic autonomy, according to General Chauhan, depends more and more on indigenous innovation ecosystems and less on imported technology.

He also emphasised the need for more cooperation between the military, industry, start-ups, and academia, noting that the dynamics of military competition would no longer just be about obtaining platforms but about innovating and quickly adapting. In this changing world, the use of force is more and more dependent upon being able to integrate information, technology, and decision-making into a coherent operational system.

### **The Unfinished Transition**

Military changes seldom come to an end in a single term. Institutional reforms frequently develop gradually over long periods of time, in contrast to traditional military operations that yield obvious and rapid results. Organisational culture, strategic thinking, technology adaptability, and operational doctrine changes often persist long after the initiators depart from their positions. As a result, the relevance of General Anil Chauhan's tenure may ultimately depend not only on the accomplishments made during his stint as Chief of Defence Staff but also on how further advancements build upon the same foundations.

While the overall goal of jointness has been accorded significant strategic support, the implementation process is an institutional process, which will take time. Defence reforms historically take time to happen because of the size and complexity of military organisations. India's defence forces consist of around 1.4 million serving personnel, and a significant level of coordination is needed at various levels when it comes to changing their command systems, doctrines, logistic processes, and distributions of resources. Technological change adds its own stresses. Traditional procurement processes are much slower to move forward than AI capabilities, autonomous systems, and digital technologies. The time for conventional military procurement can be measured in years and can result in operationally relevant changes in technology within, say, months. Thus, the challenge now is not just to get systems but to keep military institutions flexible so that they can adapt all the time.

India's broader strategic environment adds further complexity. The country is also dealing with several threats towards its northern region in the context of continental security, maritime responsibilities in the Indian Ocean Region, and emerging threats in cyber and information realms. India also has one of the world's largest standing armies and copes with a wide range of conventional and non-conventional security threats. Balancing current operational readiness with military transformation thus continues to be an arduous strategic challenge. Operation Sindoor in May 2025 provided an early, practical test of the ideas that General Chauhan promoted. The use of precision strikes, drone assets, and multi-domain coordination showed that the transition from mass to networked warfare was no longer theoretical. For years to come, discussions over General Chauhan's legacy would be influenced by whether or not India's institutions were adequately ready for that situation and how fast they adjusted.

As a result, General Chauhan's tenure may have been more significant for starting discussions and institutional changes whose results may not be fully apparent right away. Military transitions are rarely evaluated at the time they take place; instead, their impact on institutional resilience, operational readiness, and strategic culture is frequently evaluated years later. Whether General Chauhan's institutional foundations can resist inter-service conflict, budgetary constraints, and the institutional inclination to return to previous systems will be the true test of his tenure under his successor. His reform agenda's unfulfilled focus is still on theatre commands in particular. General Chauhan's tenure will be remembered as the pivotal moment if they are operationalised with true jointness.

## **Conclusion**

General Anil Chauhan's tenure was characterised by a time when war itself was changing at an unprecedented rate. The focus on jointness, technology adaptation, and future battlefields underscored his commitment to equipping India's military forces for the evolving security landscape. It was not just a doctrinal commitment. It significantly influenced the mindset of a generation of officers who will lead India's military through the 2030s, as well as institutional frameworks and procurement decisions. In many cases, these reforms are only in the early stages, and their full impact may only become visible a decade from now.

In the end, General Anil Chauhan might be best known not just for the changes he ushered in during his time but for occupying a unique space sandwiched between the age of conventional warfare and the age of technology, networks, and cognitive warfare in India's military history. In many ways, he was a general between two eras. The wars he spent his

tenure preparing India, which may not arrive on his watch. But if they do and if India is ready, the groundwork laid quietly between 2022 and 2025 will have mattered more than any battle he ever fought.

### **DISCLAIMER**

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. 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.

## ENDNOTES

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