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**MULTI-DOMAIN OPERATIONS AND
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CONTINUUM IN PRESENT TIMES**



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Introduction

The modern technologies have outpaced the distinction between physical domains defined by geography. The incorporation of these technologies in the armed operations has transformed the nature, character and methods of warfare. The contemporary combat zones are not restricted to armed confrontations on land, sea, air, and space. The successful conduct of modern military operation requires cognitive and information domains to act alongside these traditional domains. The inclusion and unification of all the domains and their capabilities lead to optimisation of the operational potential of the forces. This integration facilitates and drives Multi-Domain Operation (MDO). The effective execution of MDO depends on the cross-domain synergy, integrated communication systems, coordinated kinetic and non-kinetic systems etc. The command structure is also an essential component for this. It ensures the effective synchronisation of the forces at the battleground. India's security strategy has long been defined by its 'two-front' threats. The recent breakthroughs in China and Pakistan's military

engagements particularly regarding capabilities in the aerospace sector, Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR), precision attack capabilities, anti-access and area denial systems, electronic warfare systems, cyberspace assets etc has become a concern for India. In order to deal with this 'collusive threat' it is crucial for India to modernise its force and restructure its architecture. Operation Sindoor was a defining moment for India's strategy of modern military responses. It was a coordinated, synchronised and integrated tri-service military operation. This coordination was achieved through continuous integration of the tri-services for MDO. The paper seeks to explore the interplay between an integrated aerospace command and MDO of India. It also examines the force structure and operations of the Defence Space Agency (DSA) of India and People Liberation Army Aerospace Force (PLAASF) of China. The paper highlights that India's security structure exhibits some constraints for an integrated aerospace command. India's should commence structural reforms for an integrated aerospace command for seamless MDO execution amid adversaries' aerospace capabilities and to secure the broader security interests.

The vanishing line between air and space and the MDO

The traditional distinction between outer- space and air has been made obsolete by technological developments in the realm of aerospace. They are recognised by contemporary armies as a continuous and uninterrupted battlefield. The term "Aerospace Continuum" is frequently used to describe this. The alteration of the fundamental traits of reach, mobility, flexibility, responsiveness, lethality, and cross-domain capabilities and technologies of the vertical domain have completely changed the nature of combat and confrontation. The emergence of near-space weapons such as hypersonic and ballistic missile systems have increased the security risks in both air and space domains. The space-based ISR and early-warning systems which are critical to the effective completion of airborne missions are also vulnerable to these systems. The operational boundaries are being blurred by these technological advances, making it a continuous operational domain. The lack of an international law makes the private companies that offers communication services, internet and other satellite services are prone to become active targets in contemporary wars. As a result, institutional reorganisation is taking place and major powers are recognising air and space as an integrated domain. In 2013, the British Royal Air Force unveiled Joint Doctrine Publication

0-30, which specifically addressed space and air as a continuous continuum.ⁱ Due to the substantial and indispensable reliance on space-based assets in national security operations, the Indian Air Force's doctrine of 2022 also recognises the shift toward an aerospace force.ⁱⁱ The doctrine expanded the fundamental characteristics to incorporate unified trans-domain operational capabilities and acknowledged seamless collaboration across different domains for future operations. It recognises that the constellation of satellites for ISR, command and communication systems, electromagnetic spectrum, space and ground-based sensors and warfare systems are important for a successful strikes and operations in the domain along with the aircraft's strength. This dependence serves as the foundation of broader MDO strategy. The synergy of the forces across the traditional operational domains and the emerging cognitive and electromagnetic domain is necessary to secure a nation's strategic interest during peace and conflicts. MDO's emerged as an indispensable feature of modern warfare due to the extension of battlefield across the physical, virtual, digital, and artificial intelligence levels. These operations are often defined as a comprehensive operational strategy across multiple contested domains in order to overcome the adversary through a combined and calibrated force.ⁱⁱⁱ MDO aims to cut down the operating time and thus, gain a competitive edge over the adversary by penetrating and disintegrating in their systems. These operations concentrate on concurrent, synchronised, and cross-domain activities through various mission commands. The Army Training and Command Doctrine of the United States of America emphasises the use of MDO to confront enemies in each contested domain.^{iv} The MDO anchors upon the decentralisation of the resources and integration of the forces for accelerating the process of data collection, distribution and application at ground level by the forces. Aerospace power is integral to the concept of MDO by operating across land, water, air and encompassing space-based capabilities. Janos Csengeri, in an article mentions that precision, speed, command and control systems and synchronised capabilities across-domains makes aerospace inseparable from multi-domain operations.^v The aerospace assets avoid delays in the formulation and implementation of operational strategies by providing a uniform operational overview of the whole battlefield. Thus, aerospace power empowers the MDO as it can strategically function with every other domain.

Integrated Aerospace Command and reorganisation of PLA's command

The MDOs relies on all of the operational domains in order to strategically manage the battlegrounds. As a result, the strategies for cooperation across services and their platforms have transitioned. The synchronisation of space-based target and detection assets with ground-based systems is necessary for precision strikes to neutralise adversaries' capabilities. The development of hypersonic missiles and glide vehicles, sensor-to-shooter network systems, stealth drones, pseudo-satellites etc, have made the domain contested. These technological, institutional and theoretical changes have made the development of an integrated aerospace command inevitable. The unifies and cohesive force posture has become a strategic prerequisite for successful operations in contemporary conflicts. The Operation Sindoor by Indian Armed Forces against the terror infrastructures in Pakistan successfully demonstrated this cohesion. The integrated command and communication systems, electronic warfare systems, ISR systems, layered air defences- Aakash, Barak-8, S-400 etc, all provided support at tactical and operational levels.^{vi} India have to encounter a series of retaliatory strikes including cross-border artillery and mortar shelling, drone attacks, missiles, cyber-attacks simultaneously. These multi-domain attacks were addressed by India through synchronised operations. These operations also incapacitated Pakistan's retaliatory capabilities. The operation emphasises the imperative for an Integrated Aerospace Command for MDO. Barry R. Posen, former director emeritus of the Security Studies department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has analysed the United States of America's grand military strategy. He argues that a complete military organization must rely on "command of the commons," where the 'commons' are constituted by sea, air, space, and cyberspace.^{vii} The commons of Barry's writings exhibit tactical, operational and strategic parallels with the fundamental principles of multi-domain operations. Stephen Peter Rosen, a national security specialist also asserts that a number of variables can influence a nation's military strategy during peace and war. He claims that the foundation for incorporating new tactics and technological innovations is the organisational restructuring and institutional reforms within the command structure.^{viii} According to him the centralised and rigid command structure restricts the strategic growth which requires new strategic commands. The institutional and doctrine-based structures in the United States of America have reflected this. In 2019 with the establishment of a separate

United States Space Force under the Department of Air Force made a strategic declaration. It recognised space as a distinct command integrated into a continuous continuum with air power. Prior to this a Joint All-Domain Command and Control framework became operational in 2013. This Joint Command was formulated as a strategic architecture for a unified network and developed as distinct warfighting doctrine by the U.S.A Department of Defence.^{ix} This was established to bridge different sensors, shooters, command centres across-domains with the communication networks. This integration helped in enabling ‘decision dominance’ by accelerating the Observe Orient Detect Act (OODA) loop. This recognition-initiated restructuring of forces by other states and the merger of different commands for the establishment of a distinct force for the aerospace continuum.

In late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping revitalised the China’s state strategy of ‘four modernisations. These modernisations were across agriculture, industry, science & technology and national defence. The programme was adopted in response to the changing geopolitical circumstances, regional power-play and economic globalisation. The modernisation programmes also acted as a catalyst for China’s military modernisation throughout the 1980s. China has undergone several reforms at the institutional and doctrinal levels since then. These reforms ensured the incorporation of modern military technologies at both tactical and operational levels. In 2015, China initiated its major command reorganisation program. This was regarding the abolition of traditional distinct military departments for the formation of a joint command structure. The People Liberation Army Strategic Support Force (PLASSF) was formed as a result of this reorganisation. The PLASSF combined the capabilities across the domains of space, cyberspace, electronic warfare systems, and psychological warfare. In 2024, however, it was dissolved unexpectedly. The PLASSF was replaced by three specialised forces which are placed under the direct command of the Central Military Commission (CMC). These three forces were- the People Liberation Army Aerospace Force (PLAASF), the Cyberspace Force, and the Information Support Force.^x The forces were reorganised to streamline the resources and commands, and organise the troops under the centralised command of CMC. The CMC acts as the apex body and exercises direct command over the critical assets and aligns emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and big data with China’s military strategy. The PLAASF is established as a dedicated military space service which performs operations like missile defence, strategic monitoring, space awareness, and

maintains early warning systems. It focuses on bringing the rocket logistics, network systems and space-based assets under a separate force. Thus, it brings the operational assets under a single structure. This leads to enhanced coordination and reduces unnecessary delays. The massive satellite fleet and missile early warning systems of the PLAASF serves as the base for ISR operations and ensures precision attacks.^{xi} It is also mandated to ensure credible deterrence by incorporating both offensive and defensive aerospace operational capabilities. This restructuring emphasises China's keen focus on MDO in contemporary warfare. It's security concerns in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and any potential future military confrontation with the neighbours required MDO capabilities. The PLAASF was therefore established to integrate the outer-space and the air power capabilities along with ground-based systems for MDO. It also reflected China's understanding of modern military strategies and technologies that will ensure success at tactical and operational level.

India's Architecture through integration and formation of DSA as a tri-service agency

The complex security concerns and the geopolitical conditions have made MDO a necessity for India. The recent institutional, operational, and doctrinal reforms illustrate the incorporation of the concept of MDO in the strategic discussion and tactical application. The most significant step towards MDO was the establishment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) position in 2019. The office of CDS has emphasised integration of the forces as a pre-requisite during military operations and systematic integration of the six frontiers: land, sea, air, space, cyber, and cognitive.^{xii} It also pursues the "whole of a nation" strategy by fostering civil-military fusion to leverage private sector innovations in cutting-edge technologies and incorporating that in the armed forces. As the traditional single service commands are no longer relevant in modern conflicts, the office also puts theaterisation as a crucial component of the unified national security architecture. The former CDS, Gen. Anil Chauhan has repeatedly acknowledged significance of Integrated Threat Commands for enhancing two operational elements of force creation and application.^{xiii} The Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) work at the operational structure. It protects India's airspace digitally. By combining all ground and airborne radars, sensors, satellites, and missile systems, the IACCS functions as the centre of air defence, leading to a uniform operational planning and faster response times.^{xiv} By combining the data with civilian and Airborne Warning and Control System and addressing

threats throughout the joint service network, IACCS served as an invisible barrier during Operation Sindoor. In terms of doctrines, the publication of unified concepts pertaining to airborne and helicopter operations, cyberspace operations, amphibious operations, and MDO confirmed the shift toward the integration of forces across multiple domains. By structurally combining kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities and cross-domain force insertion for rapid tactical deployment, these doctrines established the foundation for multi-domain warfare.^{xv} The Joint Military Space Doctrine was the most important of all the concepts. This doctrine places a heavy emphasis on the importance of space-based infrastructures for both national security and as a critical domain of warfare for coordinated operational planning and its strategic execution.^{xvi} A unified command structure and national security strategy follows this.

India faces simultaneous threats from two adversarial air forces. This makes the aerospace a fiercely competitive domain across on the borders. This competitive environment effects the strategies for subsequent operational and institutional choices. The Defence Aerospace Agency (DSA) was created with the objective to close the strategic gap. The creation was under consideration since a long time. DSA was created after the Integrated Space Cell was upgraded in 2018 and it entered into services in 2019. It functions under the Integrated Defence Staff and is mandated to monitor, plan, and carry out space-related activities of the three services under a single agency.^{xvii} It oversees communication, navigation, and space-based ISR and is crucial in coordinating government and private space entities to meet military requirements, develop infrastructure and specialised space and counter-space technologies. DSA operates as a coordinating agency between the three services rather than a separate organisational entity. In order to meet India's broader objectives of transforming into an integrated Air and Space Force by 2035, the functions and capabilities of DSA must be enhanced. According to Air Marshal Diptendu Choudhary, DSA was a first step in integrating space capabilities, but in order to guarantee MDO, it needs to be strengthened institutionally and integrated into India's joint doctrines.^{xviii} Given the regional geopolitics, security perceptions, and broader national security policy, India would benefit strategically from the establishment of a command level organization like to that of other major countries like China and the United States of America. The significant structural and institutional challenges of an integrated aerospace command and institutional cooperations are to be managed simultaneously to protect the larger strategic interests.

Re-imagining India's strategy for Integrated Aerospace Command and MDO

The coherent and interdependent nature of air and space power have already been explored. It has also been established that the effective execution of modern military operation relies on the unification of capabilities across domains including outer-space, cyber and cognitive domains. This brings an Integrated Aerospace Command at the centre of discussion. It serves as a unifying authority that bridges air, near-space, and outer-space assets into a single continuum through synergy. Considering the geopolitical landscape, India's security concerns are beyond merely securing its frontlines. It has to deal with asymmetrical, kinetic and non-kinetic security threats along with managing the cyber and outer-space security concerns. China's ambitious military modernisation efforts and the deepening strategic axis with Pakistan raise the security concerns even further. Its focus on aerospace, directed energy weapon systems, counterspace weapons including anti-satellite missile systems, and ISR systems enabled by artificial intelligence poses crucial security challenges. This adds another dimension to the already contested security envelop. The advanced outer-space technologies serve as a critical enabler at tactical, operational and strategic levels for the armed forces. India witnessed this during the Operation Sindoor. Under such geostrategic conditions, India cannot rely on traditional military architecture and technologies. The modern warfare calls for synergy between the Ministry of Defence, the Indian Space and Research Organization, the Defence Research and Development Organization, different commands and private players.^{xix} The response time during crisis has to be analysed to shorten the OODA loop in order to achieve strategic dominance over the adversary. The gaps in information gathering, analysis, transmission and operational execution are to be addressed to maintain and leverage this strategic dominance. India has developed various measures to deal with such crisis. The updated doctrine of IAF emphasises that India must enhance the strategic capabilities of the IACCS. It explicitly calls for transforming the IAF into an aerospace force given the modern nature of warfare.^{xx} The command structure requires comprehensive reorganisation as the adversaries are technologically sophisticated and India's own security concerns are varied. The recent military engagements have verified the approach for MDO and this is also reflected in policy formation, adaptation and implementation.

Dr. Rajagopalan is a leading defence expert and former Director of the Centre for Security, Strategy and Technology at the Observer Research Foundation. She has examined the framework for an integrated aerospace command for India. She acknowledged that India has achieved significant technological advancement in aerospace technology, including those in propulsion technologies, launch vehicles, in-orbit infrastructure, navigation systems, and military aviation. She argues that amidst all the technological developments there isn't an integrated aerospace command for integrated defence.^{xxi} This absence exposes India to strategic vulnerabilities and compels a structural reorganisation. The reorganisation must be carried out at all levels i.e operational, institutional, intellectual, capability development and later capacity upgradation. The release of a series of military doctrines by the Integrated Defence Staff Headquarters in 2025 reflects the recognition at intellectual and operational level. The Joint Doctrine of Cyberspace Operations, Doctrine for Special Operations, Amphibious Operations etc, are an extension of this strategic inclusion. The Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operation was also released indicating the integration of the concept in India's larger security strategy. An interim solution at the institutional level was provided after the formation of DSA. Its role however needs to be expanded and it should move in the direction of functioning as a separate operational command. The effectiveness of MDO is undermined by certain structural inefficiencies and gaps in autonomous and integrated functioning. This delays the decision-making and implementation process. India cannot afford this delay and this was evident during Operation Sindoor. Therefore it is necessary to discuss the concept of a separate aerospace command. It should be analysed beyond the premise of the IAF and as a distinct command. The development, acquisition and integration of capacities is required, including secure communication networks, reliable ISR systems, real-time data collection and analysis systems, and ground-based sensors and devices.^{xxii} The military infrastructure and armed forces institutions are critical for the success of MDO. The IACCS must also be reanalysed and improved for a resilient and integrated aerospace command.

Conclusion

The MDO have become a reality in modern conflicts. The integration of forces across domains is a prerequisite for the successful completion of military and non-military operations. States have adopted institutional and structural reforms to integrate these changes. The outer-space

technologies have made air power unable to act independently. Therefore, the commands should also function across domains for force optimisation. This makes the integrated aerospace command an essential element of the command structure. Major powers of the world have introduced multi-domain force's structure and have recognised dedicated space forces. The capabilities of China's PLAASF's in aerospace and overall MDO capacity determines India's security strategy. India should analyse and reorganise its existing institutions, policies and strategies to combat these multi-domain threats. The choice to restructure command is made possible by the layered security architecture, which includes joint doctrines, CDS, DSA, theaterisation reforms, joint network systems, communication systems, etc. China has created a specialised aerospace command and is developing its capabilities in the aerospace and outer-space domain. This requires structural changes and makes the existing tri-service integration insufficient for modern conflicts. The creation of DSA was indeed a revolutionary step in integrating the space-based assets, but changes are required in its command structure for operational autonomy. Similarly, the IACCS must be updated to include advanced technologies like AI, big data and state-of-the-art network systems. India's argument should now focus on how to adapt and carry out the requisite changes rather than whether or not it needs an aerospace command.

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