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‘Theaterisation’: A Desideratum for National Security



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Introduction

The Indian Defence Forces are at a cusp of major transformation through the ongoing reforms in higher defence management. In 1980, Mr. K Subramaniam and Gen S K Sinha enumerated the need for jointness and integration in the Indian Armed Forces. The Kargil War Review Committee (2000) observed that there was serious lack of synergy amongst the three wings of the Armed Forces, and also lack of coordination between the Armed Forces and the Civil authorities. It recommended radical change in the defence by ways of appointing a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), joint theatre commands and integration of the services with Ministry of Defence (MoD).¹ In 2001, the Group of Ministers' Report on "Reforming the National Security System" also recommended the creation of the post of CDS, being the single point of advice to the government.²

Key Points

- The requirement of integration to fight future wars is ubiquitous. The urgency to implement defence reforms need to be calibrated and deliberated to achieve the desired results in the battlefield.
- There is a need for a strategic review and a review of joint doctrines in vogue of the current defence reforms.
- The 'bottom-up approach' has not worked hence there is a need to adopt a 'top-down approach' towards implementing the reforms.
- Intrinsic optimisation of resources of all the three services and sister organisations is the need of the hour to achieve integration.
- A threat based India specific model of theatersiation conforming to the geography of the country should be planned and implemented.
- The transition from service specific operational control to the theaterised model has to be deliberate, well calibrated and in a phased manner.



The Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC), the first of the joint commands was established in 2001. In 2011-12, the government formed a task force, the Naresh Chandra Task Force on National Security, to review the status of the GoM- recommended defence reforms a decade later. The committee emphasised the need of a CDS and talked about the creation of functional commands of Space, Cyber and Special Forces.³

The Shekatkar Committee was formed in 2015, and it provided 188 recommendations towards the defence reforms. The need for jointness, creation of CDS, creation of joint war college, optimisation of the defence forces were amongst the main highlights.⁴ The Indian model of defence management and the structures are archaic and dates back to the time when India got independence. Hence, they do not conform to meet the challenges of future warfare which are largely technology driven. India is perhaps the last of the large militaries to theaterise. The 'status quo syndrome' has been the norm and the polity, bureaucracy and the defence forces have been functioning in their respective silos protecting own 'turfs'. With two collusive adversaries on our borders and the existing sponsored terror threat, the Indian Defence Forces needs to change gears to achieve jointness and meet the future challenges.

On 15 August 2019, the announcement of CDS and the creation of the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) was a major breakthrough in defence reforms. The desired reforms are slowly unfolding; however, their implementation has to be slow and timely. The bottoms- up approach largely hit a road block as the efforts made by the services were in silos and did not yield desired results. Therefore, it is time that driven a top-down approach is adopted and reforms are implemented but gradually and with less turbulence.

Lessons Learnt from Foreign Countries

Some lessons India needs to take account of are as follows:

United States

One of the key aspects of US' hard and soft power is the US military's joint operational commands. Driven by the Goldwater Nichols Act 1986, which sought to accomplish a number of objectives designed to improve the overall effectiveness of the defence forces. The legislation's primary thrust was to improve the interoperability, or jointness among the military services at strategic and operational levels. It streamlined the military chain of command, which now runs from the President through the Secretary of Defense directly to Combatant Commanders (CCDRs, all four-star Generals or Admirals), bypassing the Service Chiefs. The Service Chiefs were assigned Advisory Roles to the President and the



Secretary of Defense. They were also given the responsibility for training and equipping personnel for unified combatant commands.

As of today, the US has six theatre commands based on geographical regions and four functional commands. The theatre commands are supported by the functional commands as far as operational necessity is concerned. The joint structures were validated in various operations like Op Just Cause (Panama, 1989), Op Desert Storm (Iraq, 1991) and Op Deliberate Force (Bosnia, 1995).⁵ The act was reviewed in 2016 by a study group which evaluated the campaigns undertaken by US. The group identified significant strategic level gaps between the military staff and the civilian leadership, a case in point being the military's failure to give President Bush a range of options for Iraq in 2006—a gap in overall national strategy formulation and evaluation was observed; there were huge gaps in the national level decision making as the civilian bureaucracy lacked the understanding of military strategy and the military's need for planning.⁶ In order to overcome the gap, the group recommended strengthening the capability of the Joint Staff to contribute to strategy development, to inform the development of operational plans and the identification of military alternatives to address contingencies. Review of the Department's strategic guidance documents and the processes for developing them, with goals of providing greater clarity and cohesion, minimising complexity. It also recommended the analysis of the staffing functions such as logistics, intelligence and plans in the Joint Staff, the COCOMs, and subordinate commands for potential redundancies and opportunities for savings⁷. It took 15 years for the Americans to reform and pass a legislation and over 30 years to stabilise the model of 'theaterisation' which is being continuously reviewed and refined.

China

The Chinese reforms are based on its Defense White Paper published in 2015 which focussed on jointness, particularly in view of the Rebalancing Policy of the United States in the Asia-Pacific Region. China have optimised its available forces to effect operations in a coherent manner. Keeping this in mind, China has amalgamated the Seven Military Regions to form five theatre Commands.⁸ The 'Western Theatre Command' (WTC) primarily focusses on India and the 'Southern Theatre Command' (STC), which has the naval component, is responsible for operations in the IOR. The PLA Special Strategic Force (PLASSF) complimented by Cyber, Space, IW and EW is a major force multiplier which leverages technology to fight wars of the future.

According to the Indian Defence Review, the annexation of Southern Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh)— one of the six wars which China is expected to fight— is estimated to be



undertaken in the between 2035 to 2040.⁹ The WTC, which is an integrated theatre comprising of all the services, is tailor made to execute this aim. The 2019 White Paper too reassures its efforts to advance the integrated development of 'mechanisation and intelligentisation', speed up the development of intelligent and an integrated military, create a modernised military force structure driven by the stabilised theatre commands with Chinese characteristics, improve and develop socialist military institutions with Chinese characteristics, and constantly enhance the capabilities to fulfil the missions and tasks in the new era.¹⁰

India: Where do we Stand?

Many other major powers have joint operational commands (either functional and/or theatre/regional commands) particularly those states with power projection capabilities like the UK and France, as also few Commonwealth Countries that are active in defence matters like Australia, Canada and New Zealand.¹¹ Moreover, developing countries like China and Russia, who have traditionally worried more about territorial defence than power projection, have regional joint operating commands.¹²

In contrast, India has only two functional integrated commands vis. the Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC) and the Strategic Forces Command (SFC). We have currently 17 single Service Commands. While each service has its own regional commands, they are not integrated and not in the same geographic location (along the western borders the Airforce has two commands, while the Army has three commands and along the northern borders both the Army and the Airforce have three commands. China, on the other hand, have only one — WTC which has assets of the PLA Army and the PLAAF integrated).

Threat Analysis

The China-Pakistan nexus remains the biggest challenge for the country. India is also situated in the middle of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)— playground of the 21st century 'Great Game'. No war-no peace situations, similar to the one existing in J&K, shall be prevalent in the future. In case of China, pin pricks on the LAC shall continue unabated and ultimately become an example of a 'no war-no peace situation'. India is bound by threat along its northern and western borders— state sponsored terrorism by India's Western adversary and maritime threat posed by both the adversaries in the IOR.

In the current world scenario, India should be prepared to respond to challenges in multiple domains of land, air, sea, cyber, space and EW simultaneously and jointly. Therefore, if India has to contain the rise of Chinese military power and its expansionist policy into the



Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, it needs to reform its military and defence organisations to effectively counter the possible threat. One could hypothesise that the creation of the ANC resulted from a civilian leadership forcing integration on a reluctant military as an appropriate response to deal with China.¹³ The integration visualising the current threat is a compulsion than a luxury. All the three services in sync with IDS will have to review the threat perception and prepare a joint strategy to overcome the threat.

Way Ahead for India

- **Strategic Review.** There is an emerging need to conduct a strategic review of the situation in wake of the current geo-political situation. It is important to frame a National Security Strategy derived out of the National aim. India requires to clearly state its grand strategy to improve its comprehensive national power, to be able protect its strategic interests, sovereignty and maintain peace in the region. India's geography, terrain, border commitments, conventional and sub conventional challenges, counter insurgency/terrorism involvements, threat perception and military resources has led to formulation and location of Service Commands as they currently exist.¹⁴ However, there is a strategic need to realign them towards achieving integration with the perspective of constructing the Integrated Theatre commands.
- **Review of Joint Doctrines.** The Joint Doctrine was promulgated in the year 2017 by the IDS. However, with the current restructuring in vogue, there is a need to review the document— especially in the absence of a legislation like the Goldwater Nichols Act, it is necessary that a Joint Doctrine is simultaneously reviewed while the work on the creation of the theatre commands is in progress.
- **India Specific Model.** The bottom-up approach has unfortunately not worked in the Indian context and therefore, the reforms will eventually have to be top- down driven. The current hierarchy, at the national decision-making body, is now contemplating implementation of the reforms in a phased manner. There should be no dilution and going back to the status quo model and the three services, in conjunction with the bureaucracy and the polity, will have to work towards integration and implementation of these reforms.

The model of 'theaterisation' has to be India specific and has to conform to the national aim and policy. It has to be structured to suit the country's geographical conditions and most importantly meet the threat against our northern and western adversary and the asymmetric threat of terrorism sponsored by the collusivity of the western and the northern adversary.



As discussions for the two fronts are ongoing, there is a merit in keeping the theatre for J&K separate initially, especially with an active LoC, the threat of terrorism and volatile situation developing in Afghanistan. The concept of a single maritime theatre command for the entire maritime domain is promising and will achieve the desired integration and can be implemented in the initial phase. The current thought process of creating the theatres based on the above should suit the 'Indianised' pattern. The reforms have to be implemented in a phased and a deliberate manner, as some problems will appear during the restructuring process, which will have to be realised and ironed out in next few years.

The creation of the Defence Space Agency (DSA) is also a positive beginning to meet future warfare challenges. The Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD) needs to be upgraded to a special operations command by integrating all the existing resources in the 'maroon fraternity' across the three services on the lines of the USSOCOM wherein the Green Berets (Special Forces) and the Rangers complement each other in conduct of special operations. Such an integration is much desired not only to meet the conventional threat but also for the 'Time Urgent Response Contingencies' which can arise in India's neighbourhood. The creation of the Defence Cyber Agency (DCA) is a force multiplier for integrated battle. These organisations could be upgraded to functional commands by integration of all the resources of the three services and government agencies. A case for 'Joint Logistics Command', has progressed with the establishment of joint logistics nodes— this process will avoid duplicity and economise resources.

- **Command and Control.** The proposed theatre commands can achieve the operational control and their respective theatre commanders should report to the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) who should also be the CDS. The CDS will then report to the Defence Minister. The IDS will have to be empowered as a staff to plan and advice the Chairman, COSC. The three directorates manning the operations in respective services will have to be integrated with the IDS to provide operational advice to the CDS. The three Service Chiefs eventually will assume the role to 'raise, train and sustain' the respective services. The Chiefs however will continue play advisory role to the CDS. The theatres will have to follow the concept of centralised control and desterilised execution by the formations. Adequate flexibility will have to build in to ensure reallocation, rebalancing of resources without relocating of the resources to ensure concentration at a point of decision.



Capability Enhancement

- ***Intrinsic Optimisation of Resources.*** Even the largest militaries in the world will not have enough resources to execute the assigned task.¹⁵ Each service' strengths and weaknesses will have to be harmonised by central assessment into a viable integrated force. The joint structures driven by joint doctrines will form the bedrock of the higher defence management. The theatre commanders will have access to integrated resources dedicated for the operations, however the authority to re-allocate assets based on the operational situation and the flexibility to facilitate cross-theatre movement of assets, will lie with the COSC"¹⁶. The crux however lies in the integration of resources at the operational level where the actual battle will be fought. The services should make an effort to integrate their resources to achieve the desired results in the battlefield. Owing to lack of assets the switching of IAF resources from one theatre to another is an operational compulsion. The IAF has the flexibility to mobilise the required number of aircraft at the point of application, which is more relevant than the co-location of air assets with fighting formations.¹⁷
- ***Training.*** Currently only NDA, DSSC, NDC and the HDMC foster jointness in training. The proposal of a joint training and doctrine command is a positive step towards capability enhancement, jointness and development of Joint Doctrines. The reforms recommended by the Shekatkar Committee to set up a joint intelligence institution and a joint war college to cater for joint courses for junior and middle level officers should be implemented on priority. Efforts towards jointness at the Persons Below Officers Rank (PBOR) level could also be thought about by institutionalising cross attachments, joint training in exercises and in courses. All these joint institutions should eventually be brought under the ambit of the National Defence University which is a long pending project.
- ***Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR).*** Achieving real time situational awareness across the spectrum is the basic necessity to facilitate fast and accurate decision making for commanders at all levels. An obvious void exists owing to the dislocation of the assets and the reluctance by all stakeholders in sharing the information. Adequate technology enabled tools are available in terms of AI and Big data which can collect, process, analyse data and predict enemy actions. The integration of these resources facilitated by 'theaterisation' through a suitable data driven communication network, is the most recommended way to provide a common operating picture, from the third dimension, to the soldier on the ground.



- **Transition.** The current geo-political scenario in the region and in the world is dynamic. The expansionist designs of a belligerent China were evident in Eastern Ladakh; the situation is fast-changing along the western borders, wherein the Taliban supported by Pakistan is on a surge. The IOR has emerged as a focal point with the QUAD evolving to counter China's designs. At this vital juncture, the Indian Government has finally set course for the long-desired reforms in its military. Hence, the transition has to be slow, smooth, methodical and deliberate. The nation cannot afford a void especially in the next two years. The shift of the operational command and control from the services to the theatres has to be calibrated and spaced out. The next few years are crucial for integration and future development of the India's Defence Forces.

Conclusion

The nature of modern warfare necessitates jointness and hence, theatersation is the most efficient form to prosecute a war. A long-term roadmap is vital to achieve the desired goals of integration driven by the current reforms. The holistic design and framework are largely resolved and higher defence reforms are on track; the minor issues of coordination, HR, command and control etc. will have to be looked into deliberately to achieve long term objectives.

End Notes

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