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for
Bharat:

A Strategic, Outward-Looking,
&
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Theatre Commands for Bharat: A Strategic, Outward-Looking, and Futuristic Vision

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Abstract

India stands at a pivotal moment in its strategic evolution, necessitating military reform through the creation of Theatre Commands. While internal debates reflect divergent views, the imperative for integration across services in a multi-domain operational environment is clear. Theaterisation must be futuristic, technology-driven, and aligned with India's civilizational ethos and global aspirations. Bureaucratic inertia and structural rigidity must give way to a flexible, outward-looking command system. As India emerges as a global force, this transformation is vital—not merely for warfighting efficiency, but for shaping regional security, supporting diplomacy, and fulfilling Bharat's responsibility as a stabilizing power in a multipolar world.

Keywords: Theatre Commands, Theaterisation, strategic necessity.

Background

Military fraternity, both serving, and retired and retiring every year, armchair military professionals, media warriors and people of the country had literally forgotten about theaterisation after few years of exhaustive media coverage, internal and external intense emotional debates and anticipation. Yes, it is six years since the announcement of the creation of the appointment of the CDS and DMA (Department of Military Affairs) on 15 Aug 2019 by the Prime Minister from the ramparts of the Red Fort. After a prolonged silence on the matter of Theatre Commands, there was some action during “Ran Samwad” at the Army War College, Mhow held under the aegis of the Army Training Command, when Air Chief Marshal AP Singh on 26 Aug 2025, at a fireside chat with the articulate and leading military luminary, Lt Gen Raj Shukla, **cautioned against rushing the rollout of theatre commands**. He said, "I personally feel that having a joint planning and coordination centre in Delhi is what is required." However, the Naval Chief, the very next day at “Ran Samwad,” reaffirmed his faith in the Theatre Commands. The same was also agreed to by Gen Upendra Dwivedi, the Army Chief few days later. The CDS, present in the event **welcomed the dissonance** on the subject. This provided the media present enough grist for a few days of coverage as disagreements in the views of the senior military leadership makes for exciting news. It evoked thunderous response and media activity for few days, but later faded again.

My personal view on the subject is that theaterisation is required but **not in a geographically constricted space of the Indian subcontinent** in the form under discussion and a theatre command headquarter will add **another layer of restriction** in the form of military bureaucracy, when the world of warfighting is flattening out. Technology, improved

infrastructure and the pace of information availability for kinetic and non-kinetic response operations demands reduced hierarchy. Given the geography, the plethora of kinetic systems and near parity and density of forces opposing in the Indian subcontinental environment, the second world war type of manoeuvres are pipe dreams. However, due to an extremely transparent battlefield space for either side, availability of kinetic weapons that fly quicker than sound and rapid movement of forces due to improved infrastructure and mobility, mandates a responsive decision taking system. **Adding another layer of bureaucracy will make it further sluggish.**

Does Bharat Need Theatre Commands?

When resources are scarce, distribution becomes a challenge. They need centralised control. The Air Power, however limited, provides for strategic shifts and coverage, and therefore maybe controlled centrally. But growing **Bharat must plan ahead into the future** and must create **theatre commands that aligns to the vision of 2047** and not be an exercise for adjustments.

As the global order undergoes rapid transformation, with **American power waning, China rising, and a resurgent Global South, India stands at a rare strategic crossroads.** If internal stability is preserved and external disruptions are managed wisely, Bharat has the opportunity to emerge as the fourth pole in a multipolar world, not as powerful and disruptive, but enabling and empowering the world. It is already an economic force well on its way to be the third largest economy and has a credible military that has proved time and again of the prowess in wars, conflicts, internal security situations and in aid to civil authority. More importantly, it is **reclaiming its historical stature as a civilizational force**, one that attracts alliances based on shared values, mutual respect, and constructive engagement.

This future vision demands more than just diplomatic and economic readiness. It calls for a **strategic evolution of India's military posture**, starting with the creation of theatre commands, a structure that integrates the Army, Navy, and Air Force and other new dimensions of warfare into unified commands for specific geographical or functional theatres. But for this to be truly transformative, India's theatre command structure must be **forward-looking, outward-focused, and rooted in a futuristic understanding of warfare and geopolitics.**

A Civilizational Imperative

India's engagement with the world has never been merely transactional. Unlike traditional global powers that have often sought dominance through coercion or conditional alliances, **India offers an alternative rooted in its civilizational ethos.** The idea of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" or, the world is one family, is not just a slogan popularised by Prime Minister Modi, rather it reflects the deep cultural DNA of the Indian people.

The military, in Indian context, is not merely a war-fighting machine. It is perhaps India's most visible, efficient, and effective instrument of global outreach, delivering humanitarian assistance, ensuring maritime security, participating in peacekeeping operations, and building confidence with nations in need. From protecting sea lanes of communication, to leading disaster relief in calamity-prone regions, to supporting fragile states

with capacity building and training, the Indian Armed Forces have consistently proven to be a force for stability and peace. In an age where **trust in international institutions is eroding**, the Indian military can be a dependable partner for countries looking for security without strings attached.

Learning from History, Looking to the Future

India's history offers instructive lessons. The Cholas, through their powerful navy, extended Indian trade, culture, and influence across Southeast Asia. The beginning of their decline coincided with the neglect of maritime power. Centuries later, the British and other European powers rose and fell in large part based on their military strategies. Today, as American global power plateaus and Chinese assertiveness increases, **India must ensure that military does not lag behind its diplomatic or commercial ambitions**— it must offer solutions and other rational avenues to the world to bring sanity in the highly disruptive and contested arena of competition for resources, markets, jobs and control of trade routes.

Already, India's diplomacy and commerce are going global. It is imperative that the Indian military breaks free from subcontinental constraints and evolves to protect India's growing global interests—economic, strategic, and cultural. Without **credible military capabilities to project power and deter threats across regions, India remains vulnerable to strategic surprises, especially in a volatile neighbourhood.**

The Need for Strategic Theatre Commands

Prime Minister Modi, during the Shangri-La Dialogue, laid out a sweeping vision of the Indo-Pacific, extending from the West Coast of the United States to the East Coast of Africa. In keeping with this, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has quickly realigned its structures and policies. However, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) still lags, bogged down in consensus-building and institutional inertia. The **proposed theatre commands should not be merely about structural efficiency.** If properly envisioned, they can serve as **platforms for strategic projection, enabling India to act swiftly, decisively, and cohesively across multiple domains and geographies.** There is a danger if these commands are treated as cosmetic changes, mere administrative headquarters doing the same job, then the transformative potential will be lost. The **Indian Armed Forces must own, lead, and drive the theatre command concept with strategic clarity and boldness.**

Embracing Multi-Domain Operations

Modern warfare has evolved far beyond traditional land, sea, and air boundaries. Today, **conflicts span across cyber, space, electronic warfare, information warfare, and artificial intelligence.** The future lies in Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), wherein synergy across all domains determines the outcome of a conflict. To meet this future, India must take several bold steps:

- **Embed civilian and technical experts** within theatre commands to support areas like cyber, AI, and space.

- **Operationalise functional commands** in cyber, space, and Special Forces, as already recommended by the Naresh Chandra Committee.
- **Create joint doctrines and frameworks that are technology-enabled, AI-assisted, and interoperable across services.**
- **Encourage cross-service talent exchange** and training to create a new generation of joint military leaders.

Importantly, the organizational structure must reflect this reality. It is time to **rewrite the business rules governing India's military command system**, to promote seamless synergy between the three forces.

Reforming the Bureaucratic Roadblocks

Unlike the United States, wherein the Goldwater–Nichols Act forced reforms onto the military from within, India's civil-military structure presents a more complex challenge. Here, **bureaucratic resistance, rather than military conservatism, often slows progress**. To bring true integration and effectiveness to theatre commands, political leadership must empower the military, streamline decision-making, and reform the civilian-military interface. The **structure must follow strategy and not tradition**. India must be clear-eyed about its strategic aims before designing the military structure to achieve them.

A Military Ready to Lead Global Engagement

Beyond its war-fighting capabilities, the Indian military must now become a frontline actor in strategic diplomacy. As India's defence exports rise and new technologies disrupt traditional defence markets, the military can be an effective channel for outreach, guidance, and support to partner nations seeking security and development partnerships. Whether it's training partner militaries, sharing best practices, or offering peacekeeping support, the **Indian military has the potential to be a bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, between power and principle**.

Building Capacities

Current military powers are not only about gunships, drones, planes, tanks, ships, submarines and aircraft carriers. They are also **about strategic culture wherein the national security discourse is commonplace and history and future of warfighting is shared knowledge** with the public, politicians and policy makers through proliferation of think tanks and intimate participation of industry and academia. There are about a national security eco system where debates on the future of wars, warfighting and warfare in kinetic and non-kinetic domains are discussed and debated. In the Indian context, such an ecosystem is an imperative but absent. India needs the industrial base along with the strategic eco system, to support the present and future trajectory of the Viksit Bharat 2047, that is equally powered by Surakshit Bharat vision. India must learn from the experience of the great Cholas who became a great civilizational power on the two prongs of "Viksit" backed by "Surakshit" but lost it all when they ignored the latter eventually. In India, one may like it or not, for a thriving strategic ecosystem to supporting the military industry and the knowledge base have to be owned and driven by the

Indian Armed Forces. A surge that is military owned is an imperative towards research and development for innovation, invention and exploitation of new and emerging technologies. Bharat must innovate and create technology and not merely consume what is produced by the world for which the Indian Military must hand hold.

A Recommended Road Map

The dissonance, already evident publicly, offers an opportunity to consider other options, however remote they may seem. It is felt that the new organisation should meet the requirement for at least the next 30 to 40 years. Indian Security construct should plan for **Five Theatre Commands**; three land centric and Army led, for the Western, Northern and Eastern (Myanmar and Bangladesh) Borders; the fourth one for the Maritime domain; and the fifth, the Strategic Air Command, **suitably empowered for multi- domain operations in the respective geographical space in the area of influence and interest**. These commands must be empowered to **engage and develop capabilities beyond immediate tactical and operational depths**. As the economic and military heft grows the reach of these Commands should be calibrated to **influence India's strategic interests**. **The structure should be flexible and not cast in stone as is often a major bureaucratic challenge in the Indian context.**

This will ensure that newly created integrated theatre commands **are future ready and not merely an exercise in administrative reform**. These Theatre Commands would fulfil a futuristic strategic necessity in an era of rapid technological disruption and geopolitical volatility. The structure is designed not just for today's threats, but for the complex, multi-domain battles of the future. A forward-looking, outward-focused, and futuristic command system will ensure that India is not just ready to defend its borders, but is also capable of projecting power, safeguarding its global interests, and shaping the regional security architecture of the 21st century. This will be feasible without disrupting the existing arrangement in the current world of geo- strategic churning and uncertainty.

Conclusion: India's Time, India's Responsibility

The transformation of India's military into a theatre-command-driven, multi-domain capable, globally oriented force is not just an institutional reform but a strategic necessity. If Bharat is to truly claim its place as a responsible, reputable, and respected power, then it must ensure its military power aligns with its global aspirations. This transformation is not about outpacing China or countering America; it is about fulfilling India's own civilizational mission in a world yearning for stability, fairness, and partnership. Let the theatre commands be not merely about efficiency, but about vision. Let them not be a bureaucratic rearrangement, but a strategic leap. India's military must now step beyond borders and into the future.

About the Author

Lt Gen Devendra Pratap Pandey, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, (Retd) carries experience across various terrain and operational environments. Commissioned into the 9th Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry Regiment, he has showcased exemplary leadership in diverse roles, including participation in Operation Vijay (Kargil) in 1999. With notable commands at Siachen Glacier, Chushul Sector in Eastern Ladakh, and prestigious appointments such as GOC of the 15 Corps in Kashmir valley, he has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in challenging scenarios.

His illustrious career encompasses instructional roles at the National Defence Academy, service as a Military Observer in UNTAC, Cambodia, and pivotal staff appointments along the Line of Control and in Army Commands. Holding two postgraduate degrees from esteemed institutions like the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, and the National War College at National Defence University, Washington D.C., as well as an M.Phil from the National Defence College, New Delhi, he is renowned for his strategic acumen and expertise.



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