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Fashionable to
Contest Continental
Centrality of India

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Abstract

This paper examines the arguments that portray India's strategic and defence bias towards the "continental focus" and studies as to whether the same is unnecessary in the contemporary geopolitical environment wherein technology brought in a paradigm shift in influencing warfare (Das, P. 2015). It evaluates the perceptions, that frequently are cited, prior to budget allocations and change in senior leadership in the Defence organisations— of land centrality, excessive and institutionally biased. The paper contrasts these perceptions with evidence-based arguments from contemporary conflicts and enduring geopolitical realities of the 21st century. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate relevance of land power to war outcomes, analyse if the current reform processes in the Indian Armed Forces are mischaracterised and challenge uncritical adoption of external strategic constructs into the Indian context. The essence of the paper lies in the fact that Indian strategic posture must be grounded in its geography (Singh, H. 2009), current and future threat environment, and political realities rather than being shaped by fashionable but contextually misaligned narratives.

Keywords: Continental Force, Geography, Strategic Compulsions, Defence

Recurring Pattern of Manufactured Strategic Anxiety in Inter-Service Discourse

Past few decades have seen competing interests for relevance, budget and lately a clamour for seniormost positions and ranks in the newly minted higher defence organisations being discussed and debated in public. There are fashionable narratives of the domination of high seas to secure national interests, that the most powerful naval power of 20th and 21st century has also not been able to do achieve, and the glamour of air power that has failed miserably in both the Russia-Ukraine war (Palmer, A. and Ward, K. 2025) and US-Iran conflict to get decisive political or even military success.

There is a surprising pattern in emergence of such debates and papers and articles. They often surface alongside institutional developments, such as debates around the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), clamour for more ranks and positions in existing and the other higher defence organisations or allocations of scarce defence budget (Philip, S.A. 2026). These debates are packaged around three prominent viz. *firstly*, India's land-centric posture is outdated; *secondly*, ongoing reforms, especially within the Indian Army, are excessive; and

lastly that new conceptual frameworks, drawn from Western strategic discourse, can provide corrective solutions.

Based on selective use of data and internal inconsistencies, these arguments overlook a central reality proven in ancient, medieval, modern and even in the 21st century warfare; wars continue to be decided by the control of territory. The fights, conflicts and wars are more often on boundary issues and are settled at with loss or capture of territory. The other facets are political endurance, and the ability to impose outcomes on the ground.

Myth of “Continental” Focus due to Indian Army Dominated Mindsets

The frequent argument put forth is that, Indian strategic orientation remains overly “continental”, has to do with an Army-dominated mindset and the same is bolstered with unfair comparisons with the global posture of the United States or the rising capabilities of China. These comparisons are misleading as they ignore structural differences in geography, threat perception, and political objectives.

India, faces two active and highly contested land borders referred to as Line of Control (Pakistan) and Line of Actual Control (China). With the two adversaries demonstrating revisionist tendencies, the force posture has to remain land centric—an inch of ground vacated or left without dominated will be taken; and no coercive policies elsewhere can force vacation. The same is true in the settled borders as well due to the very nature of the adversaries that have historically used limited war, infiltration, or coercion to alter the status quo. The political and human costs need no explanation wherein eviction of Pakistan Army from Kargil intrusion in 1999 and the conflict at Galwan in 2021 with the PLA over a tent on the Indian side of the LAC, led to loss of precious human lives and economic costs. For the near future, to believe that India can dilute its land focus without any strategic risk, is not merely optimistic but is fundamentally detached from operational and geopolitical reality.

Often cited is the example of the United States. The benefits from geographic insulation, with no active land borders contested by hostile powers, makes comparisons delusory. As such, the United States is, in many decades, ahead in terms of military and economic power to influence outcomes through sheer superiority. Their military strategy is inherently expeditionary, enabled by overwhelming economic and technological superiority and yet American experiences in the Iraq War and the War in Afghanistan highlight the limits of technological dominance. Despite unmatched airpower and precision strike capabilities, durable political control proved elusive once ground forces withdrew. The ongoing Iran war

wherein three Carrier Strike Groups, hundreds of aircrafts and an array of long-range missiles and drones along with the entire might of Israel were used to destroy and demolish Iran, have failed to achieve the desired results because there is a challenge in putting boots on the ground.

Similarly, in case of China, it is often cited that the military modernisation is premised on reduction of the Army by 40% and therefore a shift away from land-centric warfare (Raja, P. 2026). This is arguing through selective data. What is deceptively hidden is the numbers that speak differently. Even after reduction, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China is the world's largest standing military, with approximately 2.035 million active personnel as of 2025–2026. The Ground Forces in the PLA are 1 million. The reduction was sidestepped to other elements of ground forces such as Missile Forces and others (Funaiolo, M.P. and Hart, B. 2025). The force is supported by an estimated 510,000 to over 1 million reserves, with a total military and paramilitary personnel count often exceeding 3 million. Compare it to the Indian Army at 1.2 million and the total strength of the Indian Armed Forces at 1.4 million. Today, China remains the largest Ground Force in the world (Villarroel, K. 2026).

While it is true that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has undertaken structural reforms and reduced troop numbers, it remains the world's largest standing military. Moreover, its strategic challenges, including the unresolved question of Taiwan and tensions in the South China Sea, continue to hinge on the eventual requirement for physical control.

My counter question is that, as to how many times did the Indian Armed Forces, bereft of the comparable economic prowess and technological immersion with the “Continental Centrality” have delivered for the Nation as compared to others, almost always— 1947, 1965, 1971, 1999, in the North East insurgency, in the counter terrorism operations of Jammu and Kashmir or in aid to civil authorities whenever called for. It was only during 1962, due to political interference and incorrect strategic direction, that the Indian Armed Forces lost. The Indian geography brings different challenges and opportunities that are premised on Continental Focus due to compulsions that are political and cultural.

Territory and Irreversibility in Conflict

A persistent misconception in Indian strategic community debate is the belief that territorial losses can be compensated through economic or diplomatic leverage over time. There can be no historical experience supporting for this assumption (Raja, P. 2026). The Pakistan Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (PoJK) including the territories of Gilgit and Baltistan taken by

Pakistan in 1947 and areas occupied by China since Independence during various periods, remains firmly under their control. No amount of economic or diplomatic leverage can get these reversed (Malik, A.2024).

Once territory is lost, great human sacrifice is required to retake, as the Kargil war demonstrated, that limited intrusions require significant ground operations to reverse. In Kargil, airpower and artillery played critical roles in shaping the battlefield, but the eviction of entrenched adversaries ultimately depended on infantry assaults under extreme conditions. The conflict reinforced a core lesson that technology can enable victory, but cannot replace the need for soldiers to physically capture, occupy and secure terrain. The robots will come but they are few decades away.

Ongoing conflicts reinforce the centrality of territory. Ukraine, backed by immense funds and technology of entire NATO forces, has to take recourse to trench warfare, dismissed as obsolete, even in the highly literate circles of Indian Army thinkers who swears only on technology, and has re-emerged as a defining feature of the battlefield (Noorman, R. 2024). The western armies have already included trench warfare back into their syllabus (The Cove, 2025). The Russians, great proponent of air assaults and artillery preponderance, have been unable to move forward. Every inch matter and is being protected by significant losses on the ground. Technology is being contested by technology but the centrality of land remains.

In Gaza, despite overwhelming technological superiority, the challenge of controlling territory remains unresolved. In Iran, the war remains in a delicate stalemate between the most powerful militaries in the world, US and a second world war force viz. Iran only on account of land operation (France AFP, 2026).

Manoeuvres, at different domains of warfighting may, in rare circumstance, influence and deliver change on the ground but they cannot become the backbone or the spine of conventional military force. In any case, for India to develop such capacities, to use economic and diplomatic leverage, will take substantial time. Till then territory needs to be protected.

Collectively, these examples prove a simple but enduring principle. The control of land is synonymous with control of outcomes.

Strategic Culture and the Limits of Emulation

Another dimension, often overlooked, is the role of strategic culture. India's historical approach to power projection has been fundamentally different from that of Western or East

Asian powers. Empires such as the Mauryan and later regional powers extended influence across the subcontinent but rarely pursued sustained overseas territorial expansion. Even the maritime prowess of the Chola Empire was oriented towards securing trade and influence rather than establishing distant colonies (Raman, R. 2026).

This historical pattern continues to shape contemporary strategic preferences. India's stated aspiration as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean region is distinct from the coercive or interventionist models adopted by major powers. To assume that India can rapidly transition into an expeditionary military power akin to the United States is to overlook the economic, political, and societal foundations required for such a transformation. Military doctrine, hence, cannot be divorced from national will, resource availability, and political consensus.

Misreading of Institutional Change and Reforms

The second major criticism directed at India's military establishment is that it is pursuing too many reforms simultaneously, particularly within the Army (Raja, P. 2026). This argument often conflates distinct initiatives and misinterprets the nature of organisational transformation. Large military institutions do not have the luxury of linear or sequential reform. Instead, they must adapt across multiple domains simultaneously to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving threat environment.

For instance, the Agnipath Scheme addresses personnel structures and long-term sustainability (Pillay, D.P.K. 2024). Tactical innovations such as integrated battle groups, represent operational evolution based on field experience. Meanwhile, the concept of theatre commands reflects a strategic effort towards jointness and integration across services.

These initiatives operate at different levels of structural, operational, and strategic and cannot be meaningfully evaluated as a single process. Criticism that frames them as excessive often reflects a misunderstanding of how complex organisations adapt to change.

Moreover, the pace of transformation is not a matter of choice but necessity. Emerging technologies that include unmanned systems, cyber capabilities, and long-range precision fires are rapidly reshaping the character of warfare. Failure to adapt in time carries far greater risk than the challenges associated with rapid reform.

Borrowed Concepts and the Illusion of Novelty

There is a tendency to import and introduce conceptual frameworks without sufficient contextualisation. A recent example of usage of term such as “anti-goals” into Indian strategic discourse illustrates a broader tendency. In essence, “anti-goals” refer to defining outcomes that must be avoided (Raja, P. 2026).

While this may appear innovative, but it is neither new nor revolutionary. Indian Military, particularly the Army, has always operated with implicit “anti-goals”. They call them red lines, unacceptable outcomes, or mission constraints. Ironically, since independence India’s primary “anti-goal” has been constant—that is “no loss of territory”. Unfortunately, this very American lexicon busts the very argument that the latest articles are theorised upon being “Anti Continentalism” or simply “Land Centricity”.

This is not a theoretical construct. It is a lived reality, enforced at enormous human cost. Land has been lost and regained, and is always measured in blood and sacrifice. No framework, foreign or domestic, changes that fundamental truth. Western concepts have been in vogue only for few centuries and are failing and falling apart. Their concepts and lexicons can resolve India’s strategic challenges is a great misconception.

India’s strategic framework has always included implicit anti-goals, the foremost being the prevention of territorial loss. This principle has guided military planning since independence and remains central to national security. Can this be changed and compromised when the time and space disallow luxury of manoeuvres through any domain of warfare, while exploring options through all elements of national power. The reality is that, even if the entire budget and strategic direction is focussed on building capabilities in all other domains, it will be impossible to achieve an overwhelming decisive edge to compromise on the land power.

As proven by the intense political debate post Galwan imbroglio, “No loss of Territory” will remain a central “anti-goal” in the Indian context even if new lexicons are introduced because strategic effectiveness depends on the application of ideas within context, not on their linguistic novelty (Pillay, D.P.K. 2024).

Civil-Military Structures and the CDS Debate

A related argument attributes India’s continental orientation to the service background of the CDS, suggesting that leadership drawn from the Army reinforces land-centric thinking.

What is most concerning in these debates is not any single argument, but the underlying tendency, to pit one service against another in a search for relevance, is dangerous path.

This line of reasoning is analytically weak for two reasons. *First*, it overestimates the influence of individual service perspectives on national strategy, which is ultimately determined through political decision-making processes. *Second*, it underestimates the institutional mechanisms designed to ensure jointness and balance.

The tenure of Gen Bipin Rawat, the first CDS, demonstrated efforts to integrate perspectives across services rather than privilege any single domain. His successor, Gen Chauhan, have continued this approach, reflecting the broader objective of creating a unified military structure (Raimedhi, S. and Desai, H. 2025). The truth, as always, is simpler, decisions have been guided by national interest, not service loyalties. Therefore, to believe that the CDS, from any other service, will weigh in for service loyalties is indicative of suspect integrity and a lack of faith in the deep selection process by the system that has withstood the test of time in Indian Context.

As such, the appointment of the CDS is only a recent phenomenon existing for merely four years plus but the “continental centrality” has been there through ancient to modern age.

This aspect, relevant and prevalent to all countries, nations and tribes, is not new or changeable through nomination of CDS from different service background but is cultural, geographic and human. To reduce strategic orientation of India and the Indian Armed Forces to individual service backgrounds is to misunderstand both the nature of civil-military relations and the complexity of defence planning.

The debate for the third CDS from Navy or Airforce would possibly rest for few years with the appointment of Lt Gen NS Raja Subramani who has all round experience of operations opposite China and Pakistan, through an illustrious operational career that was capped by appointment of the Vice Chief of the Army Staff and post-retirement responsibility of the Military Advisor at the National Security Council Secretariat.

The Real Risk: Fragmentation of National Power

Perhaps the most concerning aspect of the current debate is the implicit framing of military capability as a zero-sum competition between services. National security is inherently

integrative. Land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains are interdependent, and effectiveness in one domain enhances, rather than diminishes, the others.

Attempts to elevate one domain, at the expense of another, creates vulnerabilities rather than strengths. For India, this risk is particularly acute given its simultaneous continental and maritime challenges. The appropriate approach, therefore, is not to abandon continental focus but to balance it with growing capabilities in other domains, ensuring that investments reflect both current threats and future requirements.

Conclusion: Strategy Rooted in Reality

The debate over whether India should remain “continental” in its strategic orientation is, at its core, a debate between realism and aspiration. Evidence from contemporary conflicts, historical experience, and geopolitical realities all point to a consistent conclusion that land power remains indispensable. While technological advancements and multi-domain operations are reshaping warfare, they have not altered the fundamental requirement of controlling territory to achieve political objectives.

India’s strategic posture must therefore be anchored in its unique circumstances of geography, threat environment, and political priorities. Borrowed frameworks, fashionable terminology, and inter-service competition cannot substitute for this foundational understanding.

The future of India’s military capability lies not in choosing between continental and other domains, but in integrating them within a coherent strategy. Such a strategy must recognise that while the character of warfare evolves, its nature rooted in power, control, and human will remains unchanged.

In this context, while it will always remain fashionable to contest the continental centrality of the Indian Conventional Force, the question is not whether India should remain continental but the question should be whether it can afford not to be.

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Lieutenant General Devendra Pratap Pandey, PVSM, 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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