

Post-Independence India: Evolution of Jointmanship in the Military and Lessons Learnt

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Abstract

The issue of jointmanship in the Indian Armed Forces assumed greater salience with Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and enhanced threats including collusive ones. Although unanimously agreed as a necessity, the perceptions about jointmanship vary across the Services. Analysis of jointmanship exhibited during wars, conflicts and major operations reveals a mixed bag — mainly divergent at the military strategic level yet reasonably good coherence, coordination and execution at the tactical level. To jointly outfight the enemy, the article infers the need of establishing sound Civil-Military Relations (CMR), realistic threat assessment, enhancing joint training, jointly developing capabilities, and rejuvenating existing mechanisms, especially at the strategic level. Importantly, it highlights the difference good leadership and a robust Professional Military Education (PME) makes in enhancing jointness, both in peace and war.

Introduction

On 25 October 1947, a Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) Dakota took off from Delhi for an aerial reconnaissance of Srinagar. On board was Colonel (later Field Marshall) SHFJ Manekshaw. This sortie, launched to gauge the extent and nature of the armed infiltration from Pakistan, was perhaps the first joint mission undertaken by the armed forces of independent India. It was precursor to a historic fight back by the army and RIAF in the

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defence of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Thus, a foundation of joint operations was laid early in our post-independence history. Yet, the primary medium (land, sea, air) and peculiarities of each, through which the Services exercise their combat power, have given rise to differing notions of jointmanship.

The problem got complex with the advent of RMA. Hence, although no one in the military opposes jointmanship, the means, method, structures, and achievement of this concept is where differences arise. Although the Indian Armed Forces have evolved considerably since independence, yet, questions that arise include:

- (a) Has the level of jointness been sub-optimal?
- (b) Have factors such as CMR, our strategic culture and budgetary allocations stymied jointmanship?
- (c) Is there a trust deficit within the Services?

A look at jointmanship requires study and analysis of the Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) including changes, conduct of wars/conflicts/operations, force structure development and the evolving character of warfare. The efforts and experiments of the military establishment in enhancing jointmanship throw useful lessons. The article posits that these should serve to create a road map of achievable objectives rather than ideal objectives. The role of leadership in ensuring enhanced jointmanship is also highlighted.

HDO During Independence

Upon achieving independence, Major General Ismay, Chief of Staff to Lord Mountbatten, proposed a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) comprising the three Service Chiefs (C-in-C as it was then designated) at the apex level to provide professional military advice to the Defence Committee of Cabinet (DCC). The COSC was part of the military wing of Cabinet Secretariat. The post of Chairman was proposed to be on a rotational basis with the longest serving C-in-C (Chief) being the Chairman. A number of committees were to be formed under the COSC with an aim to facilitate joint planning and functional cohesion amongst the Services. Crucial amongst these were the Joint Planning Committee (JPC) and Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC). The mandate of the JPC was to jointly prepare operational plans for consideration and approval of

COSC and DCC.¹ The JIC reported to the COSC and was to provide intelligence assessments to COSC and laterally to JPC. The system was designed with good intentions. Tragically, joint staff was never set up and the JIC was detached from the COSC after 1962.²

Faced with a mammoth refugee crisis, an armed invasion from Pakistan, a trust deficit in British officers, and economic woes, the attention of the government faced multiple crises. It is, therefore, a matter of conjecture, if a well-intended structure of HDO that had built-in mechanisms of jointmanship was unsuccessful because of these reasons.

The 1947–48 Indo-Pak War: The First Test

The first real test of jointmanship for the military of independent India came in October 1947. The response by the army and RIAF was swift and sure. Both the services suffered from a major scarcity of resources, logistics, ammunition, communication equipment, and maps to name a few. Everything was in short supply except courage and determination. It is rather unfortunate that understanding of aspects of jointmanship in this war is limited. One well known writer has opined that this conflict was essentially an army action with air power used to only transport troops and equipment and to provide limited air support to ground troops.³ This is untrue based on published accounts of the war.⁴ Jointmanship was responsible for victories in the battles of Budgam, Poonch, Shalateng, Uri, Chhamb, Naushera, and Zoji-La. The unparalleled airlift to Leh helped regain Kargil and averted the fall of Leh to the enemy. The mammoth and incessant airlift by Dakota aircraft ensured sustenance of the fighting troops, and populace, and their morale. The fledgling fleet of fighters caused havoc and broke the cohesion of the enemy. The army accomplished the onerous task of regaining territory till proclamation of the cease fire. High quality of leadership by Indian officers, making common cause and displaying the right attitude towards joint warfighting helped us emerge victorious. The first trial by fire was successfully accomplished. Ideally, the armed forces should have then moved towards a high level of jointness, inter-operability and operational efficiency.

The 1962 Conflict

This conflict with China, preceded by years of neglect of the military, involved only the army and Indian Air Force (IAF). A failure at the strategic level forced an unprepared army into combat. Lack of infrastructure, roads and stretched lines of communication necessitated the use of air power for build-up and supply. Regrettably, a myth has been propagated that air power was not used. One article mentions that in 1962, air force and navy did not come into play at all and watched from the side lines.⁵ Air power was used, albeit, in combat enabling roles such as reconnaissance, air maintenance and casualty evacuation. The decision of not to use air power in offensive operations was a political one. Under the circumstances, IAF aircrew exhibited great bravery and dare devilry in flying into the danger zone in aid of their fellow warriors on ground. Their saga and contribution has been eloquently brought out in a book.⁶ There was a failure at the apex level of the military too. There was no planning done jointly between the two Services prior to or during the conflict for contingencies and targeting. Neither Service thought it worthwhile to war-game or brainstorm even when war clouds were looming. Both, ground and air operations lacked a structured and synergistic application. The primary reason for lack of jointmanship in the conflict is hence attributable to a leadership failure at the strategic level (both political and military). The abysmal state of CMR prior to the conflict only aggravated the situation.

The 1965 Indo-Pak War

The developments from April 1965, when Pakistan launched Operation Desert Hawk, to August 1965, when they launched Operation Gibraltar, were an indicator of things to come. Yet, in this period concerted effort to jointly discuss the emerging scenario, engage in contingency planning, building the intelligence base for targeting, and jointly appreciating the situation were lacking. Resultantly, the jointmanship was sub-optimal.

Air operations in support of ground operations were largely 'reactive'. However, tactical employment of air power was undertaken as per requirement. Even the fledgling helicopter fleet was used extensively towards air-land operations. In the Kashmir Valley, small teams of troops were airlifted from one place to another at short notice. Mi-4s were modified in the gunship role.

Demands for air support took too long to materialise. Communication systems required for close coordination between forward troops and the IAF did not exist.

The navy was assigned a defensive role to limit the scope of conflict.⁷ Yet, it is notable that Seahawk aircraft of navy were placed under the operational control of the IAF on 02 September 1965 for offensive action against the enemy.⁸

The template to judge the level of jointmanship was planning at the apex level and execution at the tactical level. The former failed while the latter was fair. Air Chief Marshal PC Lal accused the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) in 1965 of treating the war as his, “personal affair, or at any rate that of the Army alone, with the Air Force as a passive spectator and the Navy out of it all together”⁹. These words tell a lot about the state of affairs. Within the military, some lessons that emerged were:

- (a) Developing a strategic understanding of war by the higher leadership.
- (b) Institutionalising planning jointly at the apex level.
- (c) Developing better understanding of sister Services, especially their core competencies, at all levels.

The 1971 Indo-Pak War

For the first time in independent India, a war was fought in the backdrop of a clear politico-military aim. Taking full advantage of the time available for planning and good leadership within COSC, the armed forces were able to display good jointmanship. Several measures were put in place to ensure this. They included establishing Tactical Air Centres (TAC) at Corps HQs and Maritime Air Operations (MAO) and two other elements along with each Naval command. Jointmanship was achieved in a ‘top down’ and ‘lateral’ manner. Air support was aplenty and effective. The airborne assault at Tangail, the heli-lift of an entire Brigade across Meghna River, carpet bombing by An-12 and Caribou, and the incessant strikes from air were decisive in the capitulation of the enemy. A dispassionate study reveals that good strategic leadership, understanding capabilities of sister Services, good planning, quantification of effects required in targeting, and establishing sound processes for interface were crucial in attaining victory.

Operation Meghdoot

On 13 April 1984, the army and IAF jointly launched an operation to pre-empt Pakistani occupation of Siachen glacier. This tactical action later assumed a strategic dimension. At 36 years and counting, this is the longest joint operation India has undertaken. The army and IAF have been fighting shoulder to shoulder at the world's highest battlefield, making it unique and unparalleled. The fine-tuning of operations has drawn awe and admiration from foreign militaries. The bonding, camaraderie and understanding between the helicopter pilots of IAF, Army Aviation Corps and the units deployed is a classic example of excellent jointmanship.¹⁰ The lesson that emerges is that given the right direction and attitude, it is possible for two or more Services to synergise their efforts and create history.

Operation Pawan

The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was inducted in the backdrop of political infirmities, strategic blunders, and lack of cohesion amongst various government organs. On the brighter side, the COSC appointed GOC-in-C Southern Command as the Overall Force Commander (OFC) with component commanders of the three Services under him. However, in less than a month, navy, and IAF Cs-in-C responsible for providing forces, declined to delegate command. The component commanders were recalled and replaced by liaison officers.¹¹ Lieutenant General AS Kalkat, in an interview to Anit Mukherjee, has revealed that assets of navy and IAF were taking orders from their respective HQ.¹² In his opinion, this led to delays affecting planning and operations. Jointness was also hampered due to lack of interoperability and inability to communicate with each other.¹³ In addition, intelligence sharing was minimal.¹⁴

The first major joint operation was a heli-drop at Jaffna University. Unfortunately, it was a failure. Soon enough, the blame game started. Different versions of the operation have been written.¹⁵ Some criticised the navy's role during Operation Pawan.¹⁶ After the initial setback and chaos, a semblance of proper planning and co-ordination was restored. Procedures for joint operations were streamlined. The synergy between IAF helicopters and ground forces soon had the LTTE on the run. Meanwhile, the navy engaged in aggressive patrolling of the waters and providing valuable sealift

to IPKF elements. Jointmanship at the tactical level continued improving. IPKF elements of all three Services realised the benefits of jointness in minimising own casualties, massing firepower and enhancing tempo of operations. Naval operations afloat and IAF transport operations had a direct bearing on ground operations. In Operation Pawan, a reasonably well conceived joint structure at the strategic level was stymied at the operational level. To their credit, the war fighters of the three Services, engaged in actual combat and combat support, buried their differences to a large extent. For them, survival and victory were at stake.

Operation Cactus

Operation Cactus was a daring tri-Services operation. The IAF airlifted paratroopers who rescued the President and secured the airstrip; the Indian Navy then coerced the fleeing terrorists to surrender. There were hardly any disagreements. Issues, if any, were ironed out professionally. Mutual confidence in each other was high. The affiliation and traditionally close interaction of transport squadrons with the Para brigade at Agra was a major factor. Operation Cactus showcased effective jointness of our Armed Forces. However, no Joint Directive with an Overall Force Commander (OFC) was issued prior to the operation, possibly due to paucity of time.¹⁷

Kargil Conflict

The Kargil conflict was initially marred by lacunae in intelligence, joint staff work, procedural differences between demanding impact on targets vis-à-vis the assets themselves, inability of the army to integrate IAF into its planning process and perceived hesitation of IAF.¹⁸ Anit Mukherjee is particularly critical of the IAF.¹⁹ However, a more realistic, balanced and insightful account has been written by Benjamin Lambeth.²⁰ It reinforces that only close planning, co-ordination and transparent communication from the very beginning can enable optimum utilisation of air power in joint warfare. Once the early disagreements were resolved, the effective application of air power indisputably saved further casualties as well as compressed considerably the timeframe in which the army made progress on the ground. The IAF flew 7631 sorties devoted towards ensuring success of ground operations. The navy flew its electronic warfare aircraft along the LoC in support of ground operations.²¹ Ultimately, as often proven, elements of army and IAF engaged in

operational 'hotspots' had neither the time nor the inclination to fight amongst themselves. They rose above parochialism, fought together against a common enemy and achieved victory.

Looking Ahead

The article so far has analysed the wars/operations to decipher jointmanship exhibited. Actions in war are a manifestation of peacetime activities of planning, capability development, training, finances, and CMR. Each of these is interlinked. Barring 1971, each of the wars fought have been preceded by neglect of some or all these. Most of these factors are top driven, reinforcing the lessons from war that divergence in issues of jointmanship are most prevalent in the higher echelons. CMR in India have seen its ups and downs. Financial outlay in the defence budget is limited, and coupled with lengthy procurement process has adversely affected force structure development. A perceptible shift towards sub-conventional warfare has raised questions on the relevance of large forces and demand of the Services. A clarity on short-, medium- and long-term threats is required. A realistic threat assessment could lead to lesser wrangling for resources and a more focused approach towards capability development. Joint planning can then identify technologies/weapons in the 'must', 'should' and 'could' category and balance them with available finances. Sadly, this has rarely happened and even the Long-Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP) is basically a sum of the Services wish list.

Anit Mukherjee argues that in India, jointness can only be imposed by civilian leaders and sustained civilian intervention is crucial in improving jointness.²² However, given the general lack of a strategic culture, inadequate awareness of military power, ethos, and a peripheral role of the armed forces, it is a tall order. Former Defence Secretary, Mr Shekhar Dutt, remarked that without consensus, civilians are unwilling to accept the risks of imposing their vision of jointness as it would make them responsible for military setbacks, if any.²³

There is another offshoot of CMR that has impinged jointness. It is in defining roles and missions of each Service. Historically, the debate was non-existent till advent of air power. As air power became potent and decisive, issues of ownership arose. In USA, the 'Key West Agreement' settled this contentious issue.²⁴ In India,

since roles and missions have not been defined, it has led to avoidable turf wars²⁵, primarily for air power resources. Notable amongst these have been ownership issues of attack helicopters, the transfer of maritime reconnaissance role from IAF to navy as also the perceived (or real?) attempts by navy of taking over the maritime strike role. Technological developments have led to the Services demanding a 'bit of everything'. Creation of Special Forces of navy and IAF was turbulent. Attitudes of the Services toward the necessity of designating 'roles and missions' are varied. While the IAF insisted upon it with the Arun Singh Task Force, the other Services were not enthused. However, with the knowledge of history, it is necessary to resolve the issue. A seminal study deduced that a clearer division of roles and missions of ground and air power would go a long way in enhancing joint war fighting.²⁶ A legislative framework has been proposed to achieve it.²⁷

India was in the forefront in establishing joint training institutions. Thus, a sound foundation exists. Each Service has a functional command entrusted with training. A mechanism for facilitating joint training exists in the form of a Joint Training Council and Tri-Services Training Commands Conference (TSTCC). The TSTCC has made considerable headway. However, the variation in mandates of the three training commands requires to be bridged. Joint training, be it Army-IAF or Navy-IAF, has been enhanced in air mobility, heli-borne operations, maritime air operations, and Special Forces. A 2012 tri-Services study on joint content in war colleges observed that joint content was maximum in College of Air Warfare.²⁸ The Joint Services Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) course and common training for cooks are some good examples of success. There exists potential for further enhancing joint training.

It is the field of education that requires greater attention. Our PME should be tailored to produce strategic/thought leaders who can subdue parochial Service interests to national interests. They should understand application of military power of every Service. This will reduce the historic disagreements at the top. A robust PME should be able to clear past dogmas, avoid template responses and enhance conceptual acumen. The system of each Service planning in isolation and then stitching it with the other Services is passé. The boundary issue with two neighbours should not limit our thinking to a predominantly land centric war doctrine.

We can create asymmetry in effects with a considered application of air and maritime power in a limited war, having its origin in the border dispute. Air power can influence the time, space, and force domains effectively. A thorough study and understanding of its unique capability is essential to optimise its potential. Our PME should be well rounded and commence early. It should be open to learning the right lessons by accepting past mistakes. Mere apportioning of resources of one Service to another is not the right lesson. The PME should also be able to inculcate trust, respect and sound understanding of the other Services without a feeling of relative superiority.

The human resource development process in the Services can make a difference with change in attitude and mindsets. Officers with cross Service experience/postings require to be groomed for higher leadership positions. Although officers with a lifetime spent within their own Services are more preferred for the highest leadership position, it is now time to formulate a policy wherein, to become a three-star officer, a prior tenure of at least two years in a joint service establishment/with other Service becomes mandatory. Meritorious officers of Brigadier/Colonel and equivalent rank in joint establishments need nurturing to ensure their growth. A focused approach on these lines will create the critical mass in higher ranks that is truly 'purple'. This will enable future leaders to strike the right balance between Service loyalties and the overall war aim.

Jointmanship can be improved by rejuvenating existing mechanisms. The Joint Operations Committee that functions under the COSC can meet more frequently and jointly evolve war-plans for different contingencies across the spectrum of conflict. At Command HQs, bright officers from the other Services should be posted. Presently, institutionalised structure exists only in case of IAF in the form of Advanced HQ and HQ Maritime Air Organisation with Army and Naval Commands, respectively.

Conclusion

It is vital that the changes brought in the aftermath of creation of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) are measured and calibrated to find acceptance. The changing character of warfare means that future conflicts are multi-domain and multi-dimensional. They will require a multi-dimensional and often innovative approach. Hence,

jointmanship should represent the wisdom about fighting together.²⁹ It must also include the wisdom to overcome mindsets, train together and jointly formulate Qualitative Requirements for design and development of weapon systems that are inter-operable.

Jointness in thoughts and actions is more important than rhetoric. Each Service brings to battle its unique capabilities. Time and again, it has been proven that whenever two or more Services have been involved in planning jointly from the preliminary stage, success has never eluded us. Even as each Service retains its uniqueness and independence, the ability to match their strengths to mission objectives will be the essence of jointmanship. A swift and sure victory is then, all ours.

‘Jointness is like golf; you only have to use the right club.’

Endnotes

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² *Ibid.*

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⁵ Das, *op cit*, p 4.

⁶ For a detailed account read *‘Unknown and Unsung’* by Air Mshl Bharat Kumar (New Delhi, KW Publishers: 2013).

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⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Air Chief Mshl PC Lal, *‘My Years With IAF’*, (New Delhi, Lancer International,:1986), pp 161-162.

¹⁰ For a vivid account see Nitin A Gokhale, *‘Beyond NJ 9842: The Siachen Saga’*, (Bloomsbury New Delhi 2014); also read AVM Manmohan Bahadur, *‘I’ve Rescued Jawans at Siachen-You Never Forget It’* available

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¹² Anit Mukherjee, 'Fighting Separately: Jointness and Civil-Military Relations in India', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2017, Vol 40: p19.

¹³ *Ibid*.

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¹⁹ Mukherjee, *op cit*, pp 20-22.

²⁰ Benjamin Lambeth, '*Air Power at 18000 Feet*', (Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: 2012).

²¹ VK Ahluwalia & Narjit Singh (ed), '*Surprise, Strategy and Vijay*' (New Delhi, Pentagon Press: 2019) p 134.

²² Mukherjee, *op cit* , pp 25-26.

²³ *ibid* p27.

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²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ David E Johnson, '*Learning Large Lessons: The Evolving Role of Ground Power and Air Power in the Post Cold War Era*' (Santa Monica: RAND 2007) pp 193-194.

²⁷ Jayal, op cit, p 27.

²⁸ Author's knowledge of the report.

²⁹ AVM AK Tiwari, 'Jointmanship in the Military', *IDR Vol 26.2 Apr-Jun 2011* available at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/jointmanship-in-the-military/> accessed on 26 May 2020.