

Creating Theatre Command to Meet Our Specific Conditions

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Abstract

In India while nature and range of threats from China and Pakistan have changed, the structure of the forces to counter these threats has remained constant. Each Service views its strategic and operational role in isolation. Jointness and integration in operations come secondary to individual service assumed roles and goals. This has led to lack of synergy in operations. Apart from being a manpower intensive armed force, there is lack of interoperability between the forces with neither commonality of equipment nor economies of scale. Shortcomings in the current structure also impact force application. Besides this, the current sectoral area of responsibility and existing allocation of forces make force application predictable. The armed forces within themselves have seventeen individual service commands, most of which are neither co-located nor co-purposed. There are seven single service commands facing China as compared to a single Chinese Western Command deployed across. The existing shortcomings mandate that the system be rehailed to bring about better synergy in every aspect spread from training, capability development to operations.

Introduction

On 15th Aug 2019, the Prime Minister, in his annual Red Fort

address to the nation, announced a major decision: India would have a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Reforms which were overdue for decades became a reality. In end December 2019, General Bipin Rawat, who was retiring as the Army Chief, was appointed the first CDS. Soon after assuming the appointment he stated that the integrated commands will be set up in three years' time.¹

Emerging National Security Threats

In the immediate neighbourhood, China will continue to assert itself, seeking to establish dominance in states surrounding India and in the Indian Ocean. Military operations initiated by China would initially be non-contact, non-kinetic and then become kinetic conventional operations. Due to existing topography, Chinese forces possess the advantage of interior lines of communication, while Indian forces are largely dependent on exterior lines.

In any India-China conflict, Pakistan may attempt to take advantage of the scenario. Post the announcement of the 'Cold Start Doctrine', Pakistan conducted a series of wargames, and exercises, and announced a counter concept termed as 'New Concept of War Fighting'. This envisages induction of tactical nuclear weapons and faster mobilisation to beat the Indian schedules of Cold Start. Simultaneously, it seeks closer cooperation between their army and air force to counter Indian offensive plans.

Operations if launched by Pakistan would initially be non-linear and hybrid, while seeking to influence internal strife and employing proxy forces in depth areas, operating in conjunction with military forces, all under a nuclear umbrella. The availability of nuclear weapons is aimed at restricting the employment of strong conventional Indian military forces operating in depth for a prolonged period.

In such a scenario, India may seek destruction of the enemy's military combat potential rather than capture of territory. Hence, it is essential to plan employment of maximum combat potential at the point of decision. Pakistan remains the only nuclear-powered nation which considers nuclear weapons as 'weapons of war' rather than 'weapons of war deterrence'.

Maritime requirements include protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), supporting Indian Ocean Region (IOR) states, controlling crime and maintaining a friendly littoral. This implies ensuring supremacy in surface and sub-surface marine operations. Emphasis will need to shift to sea denial. Our island territories and offshore assets would need monitoring and protection.

In the aerospace domain, while existing threats would increase with growing capabilities of our adversaries, especially with enhanced concentration on employment of long-range missiles with greater accuracy and larger standoff ranges of weapons, the mass availability of drones, including swarms of drones, to break through even the most modern air defence systems, and remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs) have added a new dimension. Demands on airpower would be intense as would be the requirement of ensuring air defence security to the nation and its strategic assets.

Shortcomings in Current Force Structuring

While nature and range of threats have changed, the structure of the forces to counter these threats has remained constant. Each Service views its strategic and operational role in isolation. Joint-ness and integration in operations come secondary to individual service assumed roles and goals. Trust between Services has, hence, reduced at the macro and micro levels. This has led to lack of synergy in operations. Apart from being a manpower intensive armed force, there is lack of interoperability between the forces, neither commonality of equipment nor economies of scale.

Planning, procurement and processing of capabilities is only a compilation of individual service requirements not based

on a common threat profile. Even added structures adopted by a Service are kept away from the others till the final announcement. Joint Service coordination for cyber, space, Information Warfare (IW), Psychological Operations (PSYOPs), training and logistics is non-existent. Individual service logistics chains imply duplicity in demanding, repairing, warehousing and transportation.

Shortcomings in the current structure also impact force application. Inter-service coordination is only possible at Service HQ level. Current sectoral area of responsibility and existing allocation of forces make force application predictable. The air force representatives at army command and corps level are responsible to their own service chain of command rather than the army. This implies that availability of force would depend on air force priorities instead of army's operational requirements.

The armed forces within themselves have seventeen individual service commands, most of which are neither co-located nor co-purposed. There are seven single service commands facing China as compared to a single Chinese Western Command deployed across.

The existing shortcomings mandate that the system be rehailed to bring about better synergy in every aspect spread from training, capability development to operations.

Integrated Commands

United States (US) was the first to contemplate creating theatre commands. Its commands are based on a mix of the geographical and functional models. It presently possesses six geographical and four functional commands. Each has requisite force levels and integral Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities. Geographical Commands are under a single commander and can seek assistance from functional commands when needed. Russia began its restructuring in 2008. It has now created four theatre commands and removed divisions keeping brigades as the basic fighting formation. Its concentration has been on non-contact warfare as it continues

to rely on the Gerasimov Doctrine, which advocates 70 per cent non-military means versus 30 per cent military means, as was evident in its successful occupation of Crimea and the subsequent civil war in Ukraine.



Fig 1

Chinese Theatre Commands

The Chinese theatre command model (Fig 1) largely copies the US model. They have created five peacetime geographical commands. The reasons for China adopting the theatre command model is to develop an integrated joint operations capability, promote joint training and enhance familiarity between services while providing for a rapid transition from peace to war.

The Chinese Western Theatre Command (WTC) is responsible for operations against India. Apart from operations against India, its additional responsibilities include maintaining 'internal stability' in Tibet and Xinjiang. Externally it could also be deployed in case of instability in Central Asian nations. It has integral to it, adequate force levels, including special and airborne forces, needed for operations against India. However, naval operations against India do not fall within the

responsibility of this command and would need coordination with its Southern Naval Command.

The Chinese Southern Theatre Command was raised specifically for 'safeguarding sovereignty and interests in the South China Sea'. It is in this region that China would deploy its SSBNs. It is also responsible for the borders with Myanmar and Vietnam. This command is also responsible for naval operations in the Indian Ocean and has the largest naval fleet of China.

Unlike the US, China had not prepared its cadre for this change. Since the Chinese forces have not been involved in any conflict since the creation of these commands, their jointness remains questionable. Armed forces and civilian agencies are integrated to ensure that logistics support is localised and not central.

The fact remains that the concept of theatre commands has been successful to the level that every nation, despite varying nature of threats, has adopted this model with subtle variations based on their threat perceptions. India should not be an exception.

Establishing Theatre Commands

Considering the current scenario, growing variety of threats and existing shortcomings, India needs to reconsider its current organisational structures. In addition, India needs to evolve a 'whole of government' approach to manage threats. As threats flow from beyond our immediate neighbourhood, India must look over its immediate regional sphere and seek a continental role for the current, with a global role in the future.

Present Status

The study for establishing an Air Defence (AD) Command is underway and another for establishing a Peninsula Command is likely to be ordered shortly. The AD Command envisages amalgamating all air defence resources of the three Services, except those of the army's strike corps and navy's ship-based AD resources, under the air force.

The Peninsula Command involves placing all resources of Western and Eastern Naval Command, few air force resources currently based in South India, and some army formations/units into a single integrated command under the navy. It may face resistance as all naval resources under one command could limit the role, tasking and employment of the navy. This service is seeking to enhance its current holding, hence would not be willing to limit its role and capabilities from the outset.

Studies to establish land-based theatre commands are only likely to commence by the end of the year. For other functional commands, including an integrated logistics command, Information Warfare and Psychological Operations Command and integrated training command, no firm schedule has yet been announced.

The Andaman and Nicobar Command, Strategic Forces Command, Cyber Agency, Defence Space Agency and Armed Forces Special Operations Division, all of which have been established, would remain in their present form.

Options for Land-Based Theatre Commands

Integrated land-based commands could either be threat oriented or geographical or a mix of both. When considering them from the geographical option then there would be just two commands, Northern, catering to China and Western, catering towards Pakistan and beyond. In the threat-based option, J and K, which faces a major threat from both Pakistan and China, could remain a separate command while the other two could be re-termed as Eastern, looking towards China and Western towards Pakistan. An analysis of each is given in subsequent paragraphs.

Geographical Commands (Fig 2)

The Western Theatre Command (Bi-service) would stretch from Siachen to the Rann of Kutch. It would also be responsible for counter-insurgency operations in Kashmir. The Northern Theatre Command (Bi-service) would be responsible for the border from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh and would also be responsible for counter-insurgency in the North East. Thus,

India could be divided into two integrated theatre commands (Fig 2).

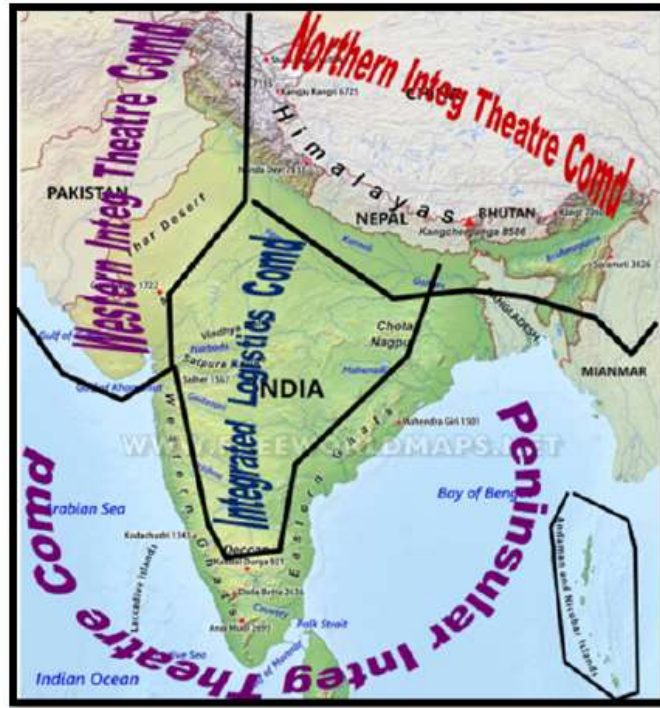


Fig 2. Integrated Theatre Commands: Geographical Approach

Advantages/Disadvantages. This option implies, one threat, one nation and for which one command is responsible. It would lead to coordinated operations depending on the nature of threat. It would make planning, deployment and synchronisation of operations easy. Each command will have multiple roles including insurgency. In J and K, where a collusive threat from both Pakistan and China exists, coordinated operations and sharing of resources may prove difficult.

Threat-based Theatre Commands

In this case, the broad sanctity of existing Northern and Eastern Commands would be maintained. The major change would be that the Northern Command would be responsible for complete J and K up to its border with Punjab as also Uttarakhand and Sugar Sector of the current Western Command. The balance border with China would be with Eastern Command. The Western Command would handle the plains, semi-desert and desert sectors, implying regions currently under the Western, South Western and Southern Commands (Fig 3).

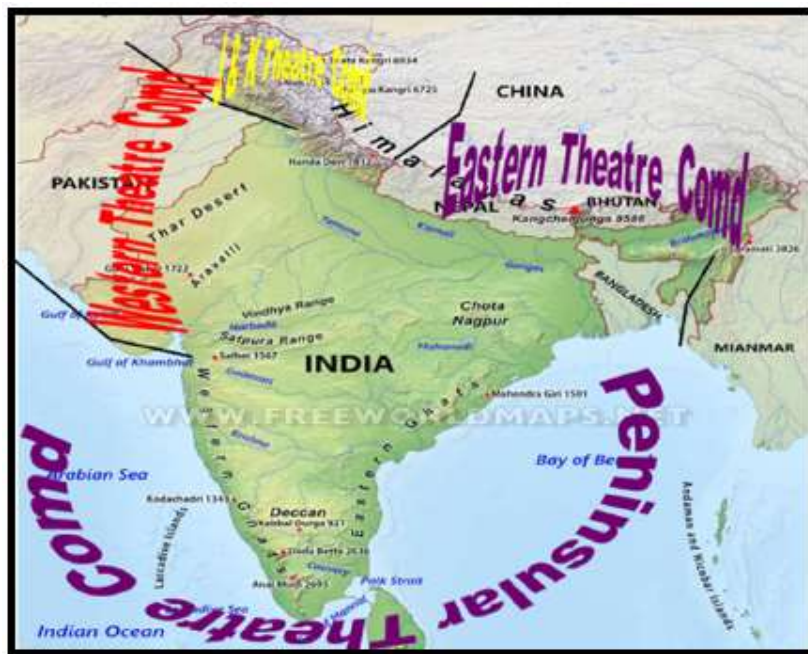


Fig 3. Integrated Theatre Commands: Threat Approach

There is an option of creating an additional integrated command (Integrated Central Command) to handle the Indo-Tibet border, extending from Himachal and Uttarakhand to Sikkim, including the responsibility of Chicken's Neck. It implies handling disjointed sectors on both sides of Nepal. However, considering that the current responsibility of Eastern Command includes Sikkim, creating an additional command for two disjointed sectors is impractical. It would also lead to three

commands facing China, implying lack of coordination in operations.

Advantages/Disadvantages. In this option, sanctity of two crucial commands is maintained. Importance of J and K as a flashpoint is catered for and the region is considered as a separate theatre of war. All strike and pivot corps are under one commander, providing him multiple options for an offensive. Airpower in J and K can be effectively employed. The major disadvantage is that there would be no synchronisation of operations against China as the Ladakh and North East sectors are under different commands.

Theatre Command Structures

Ideally, existing operational commands should remain under the theatre commands and structures below should be similar. However, in the Indian context, the intention is to reduce HQs, hence either Command or Corps HQs would remain. Considering the need for maintaining stability in operations, it is opined that once theatre commands are established and take over their responsibility, current command HQs could be closed and Corps HQs to function directly under them. This will also result in minimum destabilisation. Hence, the following is recommended, considering both the above options.

Geographical Command Structures. The Western Theatre Command could be built up on the existing Western Command. Current operational commands at Udhampur, Jaipur and Pune continue as hitherto fore. No change in functioning of Corps HQs and below. Existing Northern Command to be minus 14 Corps, which would sidestep to the newly created Northern Theatre Command which could be located on the premises of the current Central Command at Lucknow. 14 Corps would also be responsible for Sugar Sector, while Uttar Bharat (UB) area could be upgraded to an independent Division or Corps to handle the Uttarakhand sector. Eastern Command would continue in its present location. Once theatre commands are raised and functional, existing operational commands could wind up and Corps operate directly under theatre commands.

Threat-based Theatre Commands. In this case, Northern and Eastern Commands continue as at present, with added responsibility of Sugar Sector to Northern and Uttarakhand with UB Area (converted to Division) under Eastern Command. The newly raised Western Theatre Command be located at Lucknow, while existing operational commands at Chandimandir, Jaipur and Pune remain in place till the theatre command stabilises and subsequently disbanded.

Recommended Option

Considering minimum turbulence, it is recommended that the threat-based option is adopted. This would imply that while the Northern and Eastern Commands remain as at present, the others close when theatre commands are operational. Corps HQs and below should remain in place. In addition, two functional commands, not yet under consideration, need to be created. These are Integrated Logistics Command and Integrated Training Command.

Integration within Tri-Service and Bi-Service Commands

Till now, there has been lip service on joint-ness, integrated operations and handling other services. For India to achieve the level of proficiency would take at least a decade, provided an Integrated Training Command is created and commences altering scope of training, enhancing joint-ness and integrated operations. Till then, service specific officers would be required in every branch of tri-service commands for handling service matters, whether operational, logistics or administration. Their working together would bring about joint-ness and integration. The senior service officer in the respective HQs would remain his service advisor.

Land-based Bi-service Commands (Involves the Army and Air Force). Air force representatives already exist at operational command and corps levels. However, they follow their own chain of command and allocate resources as desired by their air command HQs. In the context of Integrated Theatre Commands, they would continue, however, function through their respective Integrated Theatre Commander and not the air

force chain of command. Resources already allocated to the theatre command would be their responsibility as also coordinating additional resources from any functional air force command which may be created. The strength of air force staff in integrated HQs would be enhanced, and rank structure upgraded as they would form part of every branch of the HQ as also command resources allocated to the theatre. The above would remain the norm despite whichever service officer commands the theatre.

Chain of Command

Vulnerability increases during periods of transition. Hence, Service Chiefs would remain in command of their specific Integrated Commands during this phase. Once Integrated Theatre Commands stabilise then their chain of command flowing through the CDS to the Defence Minister should be implemented.

Recommended Stages for Establishing Theatre Commands

Theatre commands cannot be created in a rushed manner. Nor can there be any error in its structuring. Further, apart from force restructuring, there is a need to consider the hygiene factors involved in the process. Ideally, theatre commands should be raised in a sequential manner. A recommended option is given below:

Phase 1. Appoint a CDS with mandated tasks and role. This has already been achieved. He would, alongside his staff, evolve a long-term plan for ultimate integration. This phase would also involve nomination of study groups for assessing different aspects of creating Integrated Theatre Commands. (This is currently in progress).

Phase 2. Finalise study group reports. These reports would be studied at relevant levels and finally approved by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). Timelines are essential to be followed.

Phase 3. The CCS on approval would push through laws for providing legitimacy to theatre commands including assigning roles, tasks and chain of command.

Phase 4. The concept should be put through a test bed, including wargames at relevant level, and one adhoc structure tested through exercises to confirm validity and determine shortfalls, if any.

Phase 5. The theatre command tested should be raised and its operational control assigned by the CCS.

Phase 6. Raising of integrated Training Command and Logistics Command, including amending the training curricula.

Phase 7. Raising of balance theatre commands and assigning their chain of command.

Phase 8. Promulgation of integrated personal policies, common military laws, rules and instructions.

Conclusion

There is no escaping the fact that Integrated Theatre Commands will be established. Simultaneously, Indian conditions and requirements for theatre commands are at variance from other countries and hence require a unique solution. Indian defence investments are also low, which must be factored in. Resources, especially airpower, would always remain at a premium. Hence, India would need to move with caution and not make rushed judgements leading to subsequent changes. Sequential movement incorporating hygiene factors, joint logistics and joint training would make the transition smoother.

Endnotes

¹ Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, "Work on establishing theatre commands to begin next year and be completed within three year: Gen Bipin Rawat" *Economic Times*, Feb 04, 2020. Accessed May 27, 2020 from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/looking-to-create-air-defence-logistics-and-peninsula-theatre-commands-cds/articleshow/73939344.cms>

²Anthony H Cordesman, "China Military Organisation and Reform", IISS Aug 21, 2016 (Working Draft). Accessed May 29, 2020 from https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160801_chinese_military_reform.pdf

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