

The Purple Path Ahead is full of Expectations and Opportunities

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“Things cannot move smoothly if anyone from the Navy, Army and Air Force is a step ahead of the other two forces, while the other two are lagging behind. All the three should move simultaneously at the same pace. There should be good coordination and it should be relevant with the hope and aspirations of our people.”¹

Shri Narendra Modi, Hon'ble Prime Minister

Abstract

India's geo-strategic location has placed it among two adversarial neighbours who have disputed borders with it. The past experience is that the security situation with Pakistan and China has the ability to deteriorate from a state of peace to crisis to conflict unexpectedly. In such a context, Pakistan and China can collude and threaten us with a 'two' or a 'two and a half' front war. To deal with such a situation, it is imperative that there should be synergised application of the three Services. The article brings out that the purple path chosen by the Govt, after years of debate, will enable the three Services to move forward in unison to meet the threat. Creating a CDS, theatre Commands, and joint acquisition procedures will provide benefits and continue to evolve thereafter.

Introduction

India finds itself in the midst of a complex geopolitical environment today. There is great power competition between the US and China, at a time when the former has exited Afghanistan and is renewing its focus on the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, China's

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economic and military power is posing new challenges to many nations, regionally and globally. India too has been particularly affected by the pandemic and from clashes with China on the LAC since early 2020. On the other hand, Pakistan continues with its hostility towards us and is progressing a proxy war in J&K. The Galwan clash and Chinese deployment in 2020 have distinctly indicated Chinese belligerence to alter the Line of Actual Control (LAC), violating existing Confidence-building Measures (CBMs) and agreements, and rendering the security situation very volatile. On our western borders too, peace remains fragile with Pakistan. At present, it is busy helping the Taliban consolidate power in Afghanistan. Further, China has been vigorously assisting Pakistan and built the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) to get land access to the Arabian Sea.

A State of Uneasy Peace

India's geo-strategic location has placed us uniquely in the midst of two adversarial neighbours who have disputed borders with us. In the last two decades we have learned that the security situation with Pakistan and China has the ability to deteriorate from a state of peace to crisis and then to conflict rather rapidly. While the chance of an all-out war remains remote due to the nuclear backdrop, crisis and conflict situations have been arising more frequently and, often, abruptly. In addition, the armed forces have had to be deployed in Counter Terrorism operations in Jammu & Kashmir for the last three decades and in the Northeast for longer than that. In such a context, could Pakistan and China collude and threaten us with a 'two' or a 'two and a half' front war? This remains a moot point but its possibility cannot be ruled out.

Nature and Character of War

The nature of war continues to be the imposition of one nation's will on another nation. However, it's the character of war that is changing rapidly. War has progressed from the traditional domains to multiple domains already. We see a confluence of land, air, maritime, cyber, space, and information domains in action now. The Nagorno-Karabakh war brought to fore the increasing role of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for intelligence and surveillance, precision fires through loitering munitions and long-range artillery, neutralisation of enemy Air Defence (AD) systems by electronic

warfare means and sapping the adversary's morale by intense real time information warfare; albeit at a lower scale compared to what is envisaged in our case. The Israel-Hamas conflict highlighted the fusion of intelligence, precision munitions, strong AD systems, and reliable networking mechanisms. Both conflicts had different scope, yet demonstrated novel methods of warfare. Technological advances in 5G network applications, artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, quantum computing, nanotechnology, hypersonic vehicles, laser weapon systems, and chemical/ biological warfare in the future are only going to make domain intersections complex and the battlefield much more intense.

India's Critical Defence Reform

Consequent to the 1999 Kargil war, the Kargil Review Committee highlighted the need for greater defence reforms. The Group of Ministers (GoM) then followed this up by taking a firm view on defence management and attempted to bring in the required jointness in the armed forces. "The capabilities of the Armed Forces can be enhanced significantly if rather than operating as three individual units, they operate with a high degree of jointness and in close tandem with one another in the conduct of various tasks, including training".²

In order to further strengthen our defence forces and usher in jointness, the Govt of India notified the appointment of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) on 24 Dec 2019. It assigned him a specific mandate while placing the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), the fifth vertical of the MoD, under the CDS, thereby integrating the services fully. The duties and functions of the CDS, amongst others, included heading the DMA as its Secretary, acting as the Principal Military Advisor to the Defence Minister on all tri-service matters and functioning as the permanent chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC).³

With the advent of CDS, the last twenty months have seen a lot of deliberations within our Services to carve out the desired purple-path. Steeped in single service ethos, doctrines, and seeking individual domain outcomes, it was but natural to be challenged initially while working towards greater jointness and integration. Even the US realised three decades after the Goldwater-Nichols Act that more reforms were necessary. As the then US Defence Secretary, Ashford Carter, said in 2016, "We need someone in

uniform who can look across the services and combatant commands and make objective recommendations to the department's civilian leadership about where to allocate forces throughout the world and where to apportion risk to achieve maximum benefit to our nation. And the best person to do that is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (COJC)".⁴ While the COJC had been willy-nilly doing it, this had not been put in writing in his charter.

The Slew of Expectations

How then does one traverse the purple-path smoothly? At the outset, a broad strategic direction is expected from the national security apparatus in the form of a National Security Strategy. This will help us crystallise immediate and future challenges. We can then derive the National Defence Strategy that primarily encompasses external and internal defence, work out required domain capabilities and capacities. Within the Ministry of Defence, it will enable the refining of the *Raksha Mantri's* (RM's) Operational Directive based on how we now identify our primary and secondary adversary. Following up, we will have to put together a suitable Joint Services Doctrine that guides integrated and modern war fighting methods in the strategic and operational planes. These, in turn, will facilitate planning, capability development, and inter-se prioritisation between individual services and the joint components. Certain missions will remain in the single service domain and can continue being progressed based on service specific doctrine. Also, 'lead service missions' may be undertaken when required. During crisis/conflict situations, based on the role assigned, the lead service could change from time to time.

One of the foundational requirements for joint combat in the battlefield transparency and decision-making sphere is seamless electronic and digital networking. While service specific networks currently linked to existing single service structures proliferate, joint service networks may need to be constructed exclusively to cater for to-and fro joint intelligence, surveillance, command and control, training, and logistics functions. The gaps in real time lateral flow of information and decision making at identified Division/ Integrated Battle Group – Fleet/Base – Airbase level will need to be bridged so as to enable swift joint operational manoeuvres. Simultaneously, cyber and space domains, which intersect all domains, also need to be secured and expanded.

Theatre Commands

Theatre Commands (TC) are a structural imperative in our journey to integrate the military capabilities of the three Services and attendant joint entities. What needs to be decided upfront is whether the next lower echelon will be the existing single Service command(s) or otherwise. This is contingent on the desirable span of control of a TC, when weighed against the additional layer of command and control (C2) that it could now become. If the subordinate level is the single service command then HQ TC should be lean and agile precluding duplication. Since the staff will come from existing resources, the current Command HQ too can be pared down.

Certain media reports identify TCs that are likely to be created shortly. “According to the current proposal that was discussed during last month’s meeting, there will be five theatres — Northern Land Theatre (J&K, Ladakh and Central Sector), Western Land Theatre (Pakistan centric), Eastern Land Theatre, Maritime Theatre Command and Air Defence Command”.⁵ The logic of creating a TC would be to improve overall combat effectiveness and, based on the role, have minimum essential assets from the Army, Air Force and Navy. Axiomatically, such resource allocation to the TC would become central to its planning, training, operations, and sustenance. As resources would always be finite, the COSC should be able to ab initio allot them and, when required, review and readjust depending on mission assignment to each theatre. One of the issues for consideration is whether all the TCs need to come into existence simultaneously or would it be wiser to initially designate one as a ‘pilot’ TC and move forward on the rest based on our experience, say, after a couple of years?

The aspect of human resource (HR) management that merits attention would be whether to confine the leadership at TC to a particular Service or to open it up for officers from any Service, as is the case with Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC), since this brings in a fresh perspective and deeper integration with each rotation. While training and creating more staff billets for cross staffing is possible, the challenge would be to create adequate purple command assignments below TCs, especially, as the current levels of command vary from Service to Service. Routing Commander in Chief (C-in-C) TC through Service command would

truncate their command tenures to the detriment of the TC. Should we then think about separate streams for purple and single service career progression after promotion to three-star rank? How do we select C-in-C TCs? If Cyber, Space and Special Forces agencies are later converted to Commands, should they be considered equivalent to TCs? All these issues need considerable deliberation.

Joint forces military training is a key facet of successful integration. A review of the curriculum for officers at the Staff College and War Colleges, followed by standardisation, is a must, with an increased emphasis on understanding of the principles of employment of each service and capabilities of land, air, and sea power. At the command/formation level, scenarios involving application of joint forces need to be simulated and war gamed periodically. Evaluation exercises could then be conducted for a TC once every three to four years by an inspection unit of the Joint Training Command, which itself could be raised from one of the present training commands.

A key driver of the current set of reforms has been the need to develop integrated capabilities, optimise acquisition between the Services, and make plans in harmony with the available capital budget. This would demand prioritising requirements between the services and joint entities. In addition, it could mean an audit of available assets, assessing feasibility of up gradation, and making a realistic estimate of new assets, costs, and acquisition timeframes.

Logistics and sustenance commonalities, arising from the requirements of Services for storing and delivery of ammunition, fuel, oil and lubricants, rations, weapon and equipment spares, transportation, and real estate, need optimisation. Should we continue with progressing joint logistics on a nodal basis or based on inventories, look at a combination of joint service and single service logistics or instead rework de novo on a joint logistics model? This needs contemplation.

The Window of Opportunities

There are a number of opportunities within the Services that have arisen and can be attempted or further progressed if already initiated. Joint operations by a TC, foremost, demand the early revision of the Joint Operations and Training Doctrines.

Simultaneously, it would be pertinent to set up an exclusive joint communication and data network at the strategic and operational levels. For tactical operations, 'single Service' networks could remain the spine and be augmented, where necessary. For a Joint Task Force (JTF), communication and data flow could be built modularly around the lead Service network. The current model at HQ ANC could be the basis of creating a HQ TC. The staff and components could be customised as befits each theatre, allowing the TC enough flexibility to create a JTF when required. The 'chain of command' and responsibility, authority, and accountability of the C-in-C TCs must be laid out deliberately.

By about 2024, we should have achieved greater jointmanship and integration, and with functioning of DMA having stabilised, the CDS may consider handing it over to Chief of Integrated Defence Staff (CISC) to reduce his administrative load. He could retain his other functions and begin to look after operations of the TCs progressively. The Service chiefs will then have to shed their operational role and contribute on operations through the COSC, to whom the C-in-C TC would report.

The CDS may seek to appoint a VCDS to assist in Operations, Training, Intelligence, and Operational Logistics. The transition of operational C2 of all the TCs from Service HQ to HQ IDS could take place over two to three years. The CISC could then focus on DMA, the acquisition processes for overall capability development, HR management, infrastructure building, medical support, and administrative aspects for joint entities.

One of the critical aspects is the shape that our Services will acquire by the end of this decade. A 'Force 2032' plan can be worked out for each Service and vetted by the COSC. This will also help work out asset management for the TCs. With common inventories such as helicopters, transport aircraft, UAVs and AD systems, communication and digital equipment, an 'Integrated Capital Development Plan (ICDP)' needs to be finalised at the earliest, with the COSC harmonising acquisitions between Services. The Service HQ could continue to bring up acquisition cases to HQ IDS and follow them through after approval by the MoD or higher authorities.

The Defence Cyber Agency, Defence Space Agency, and the Armed Forces Special Operations Division were set up in

2018. This is the opportunity to decide as to what will be their 'direct element' of support to the TCs and as to when they need to be expanded further. The ANC could continue to be a joint formation with a rotational leadership. We could also refine a number of operational issues such as close air support and strategic airlift to the Army, dynamic air support to the Navy, especially, since air vectors will be with AD Command as well as the geographical TCs. The AD Command can now expand their air space management model to accommodate the smooth utilisation of rockets, missiles and long-range artillery, helicopters, and UAVs that otherwise pose spatial challenge.

Defence diplomacy has now assumed greater importance. When interacting and exercising with foreign forces or at UN missions, we could have integrated representation to reflect our transformation. Training of foreign officers in our institutions has always paid us good dividends, for which more vacancies can be created at our joint training establishments such as National Defence College, College of Defence Management, and the Staff College.

The crying need of the hour is to bring up the Indian National Defence University (INDU) to support the thought process of such an exhaustive overhaul. Deep strategic and doctrinal concepts can then be worked upon by academics, practitioners, think tanks, and defence training institutions in a cogent fashion. Studies such as neighbourhood dynamics, revolution in military affairs, refinement of defence acquisitions, war gaming models, strategic communication, net assessments, and many others can be researched through designated 'Centres of Excellence on National Security' at the INDU. It will enable us to educate, train, and develop future leaders on jointmanship and integration.

The Joint Logistics Command, when raised, could focus on peace time logistics and common operational logistics. Since bulk inventories are different for operational logistics of the Services, these could be retained as single Service logistics systems in an exclusive vertical. A modular approach to logistics accompanied with real time asset visibility across Services could be attempted.

Conclusion

The purple path chosen by the government, after years of debate, will enable the three Services to move forward in unison. Modern

armed forces have clearly benefited from a joint approach, continued to evolve thereafter, and became more potent. The appointment of the CDS has stimulated India's armed forces to transform. With belligerent neighbours and intense battlefields of the future, the range of situations that our nation faces have become very complex, making application of national power quite nuanced. War prevention, war fighting, and sustaining peace have assumed huge significance and demand a sophisticated range of tools. If India has to become a regional power, military effectiveness will be a key factor in exercising that power. Jointmanship and integration by our armed forces is then a *sine qua non*, more so, when warfare demands a 'Whole of Govt' approach now than ever before.

Endnotes

¹ Shri Narendra Modi, Hon'ble Prime Minister, Independence Day Speech, New Delhi, 15 Aug 2019, (<https://www.firstpost.com> accessed on 11 Aug 2021)

² Group of Ministers Report on National Security, New Delhi, 19 Feb 2001, Pp 101 (<https://www.vifindia.org> accessed on 15 Aug 2021).

³ Press Information Bureau, Govt of India, Ministry of Defence, "Functions of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), 03 Feb 2020, (<https://pib.gov.in> accessed on 19 Aug 2021).

⁴ Aaron Mehta and Joe Gould, Defense News, "Carter unveils Goldwater Nichols Reform" 05 April 2016, (<https://www.defensenews.com/breaking-news/2016/04/05/carter-unveils-goldwater-nichols-reform/> accessed on 15 Aug 2021)

⁵ Snehash Alex Philip, The Print, "What are military theatre commands and why does India want to switch to them" 06 July 2021, (accessed at <https://theprint.in> on 16 Aug 2021).