



Theaterisation : A Way Ahead

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'Change with times is a must. Change can be painful, but resistance to change can be even more painful.'

—Gautam Buddha

Backdrop

In the new millennium, the aggressive rise of China, assertive resurgence of Russia, internal dissensions and balancing within Europe, the not so confident return of the US to the global arena after its recent retraction towards domestic priorities and emergence of numerous middle powers is possibly hurtling the world towards multi-polarity. The new great game manifesting in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific has already expanded to new strategic frontiers of technology, trade, cyber space, outer space, and cognitive space. This multi-domain warfare, combining politics, economy, diplomacy, military, technology and other dimensions of national power, being seamlessly pursued through state and non-state players, military and non-military means, in linear and non-linear ways, has not only blurred the classic distinct states of war and peace, but has now put nations in almost a continuum of competitiveness, combativeness or confrontation under the umbrella of Grey Zone Warfare. As such, the ongoing jostling among nations is likely to continue till a semblance of a 'new global balance or order' is achieved. The aggressive forays of China along its land and sea frontiers, followed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the near helplessness or hesitation of QUAD and NATO to put their act together against China and

Russia respectively are but the glaring examples of possibilities in this transitional phase.

In this spiralling contestation, revamping of the US led Euro-Atlantic Alliance, NATO, East Asian Security Alliance, QUAD and AUKUS on one hand, and China and Russian strategic embrace on the other, has put middle and small powers on the horns of dilemma causing them to hedge, align, and rebalance their strategic interests vis-à-vis the contending behemoths. Historical animosities, conflicting core interests, presence of volatile flash points, dangerous military posturing amid deepening strategic mistrust, and lack of conflict prevention mechanism due to a virtually dysfunctional UN, have collectively heightened the chances of use of force to the peril of global security. And the situation has already been exacerbated by 'Nationalism scoring over Humanism' during the COVID pandemic.

Consequently, India's security environment too is in ferment. It continues to face collusive hybrid threats from Pak-China nexus. Instability in South Asia has further complicated India's strategic environment. While, creditably, India has managed its security challenges in Kashmir and the North East well, and preserved its strategic autonomy in the ongoing crises, the evolving strategic scenario demands that India should critically examine and review vital

issues to identify challenges and opportunities and clearly map asymmetries and competitive edges vis-à-vis its adversaries and competitors. While a more nuanced understanding of all endogenic and exogenic factors is mandatory to identify the strategic capacity gaps, a 'Whole of Nation Approach', rather than only a 'Whole of Government Approach', is an abiding strategic imperative to integrate and synergise all instruments of national power for India to emerge as a pre-eminent power in its extended neighbourhood, a major power in the Indo-Pacific, and an important stakeholder in the new world order.

And in this nebulous global environment, the two active and aggressive colluding adversaries enjoying yawning asymmetry, both in numbers and, largely, in technology, are challenging the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India which needs attention on priority. The test of apex national and military leadership, therefore, largely lies in undertaking well deliberated force re-structuring tailor-made to Indian conditions and requirements for synergised employment of the available military means, and concurrently Build Capacity in identified fields to reduce the asymmetry and achieve the required 'conventional military deterrence' to deter belligerence and coercion to safeguard national interests.

Concept and Benefits of Theaterisation

Literally, in military parlance, 'Theatre' means a well identified geographical area or expanse (of land, sea or space, or a combination thereof) of expected operations - for which resources can be / need to be allocated separately and grouped under one commander to achieve better results.

'Unity of Command' and 'Synergy of Effort' have been the two time tested principles of war fighting, and Theaterisation in broad terms is but an organisational structuring for adoption and facilitation of these two basic war winning factors.

The concept was first adopted by the US Armed Forces post WW II, and the PLA of China has adopted it recently, with many others having adopted it in the intervening period. Theaterisation facilitates force structuring as per both, national and situational requirements. The two relevant models¹ are as follows:

- **Geographic Integration Model.** In this model, the forces and resources are grouped

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as per the geographic responsibility assigned to a Military Commander, which enables evolution of a 'unified strategy' and a 'cohesive plan' for desired results. For example the six US Theatre Commands, namely United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM),

United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), United States European Union Command (USEUCOM), United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM), covering the entire globe differ widely in spread and strength according to respective mandates, while it follows a separate Homeland Security Model for its domestic needs as there is little threat to its mainland. On the other hand, the five newly created Theatre Commands of China are presently restricted within its geographical territory, but these too differ in spread and strength according to the visualised external and internal threats

and their likely employment. The Indian Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC) falls in this category.

- **Functional Integration Model.** In this model, the forces and resources with similar functions are coalesced for coordinated functioning, as also for exercising centralised control over these Force Multipliers / Scarce Resources, for allocation across geographical theatres on required basis for optimum utilisation and results. The United States Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), United States Space Command and United States Cyber Command, and the Chinese PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF) and PLA Rocket Force (RF) are based on this model. The Indian Strategic Forces Command (SFC) falls in this category.

The concept of theaterisation adopted and tested by the two most advanced militaries overtime, accrue significant operational, logistic, and administrative benefits. The concept can be adopted for both expeditionary forces as well as for forces deployed for defence of own borders and internal threats, with required modifications and combinations, as is well exemplified above in case of the US and China. Theaterisation in Indian context would, therefore, definitely facilitate a unified approach resulting into better planning and improved military response, as also would reduce costs in the long run.²

Challenges to Theaterisation

The government announced the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) on 15 Aug 2019, to be affective from 01 Jan 2020, with a

clear intent of transforming and synergising the armed forces. However, General Bipin Rawat's quick announcements of Air Defence Command and Peninsular Command³ were deemed to be premature without proper inter-Services debate / consultations, and generated strong headwinds to the proposal of Theaterisation right at its inception. The unfortunate demise of General Rawat on 08 Dec 2021 did stall the process momentarily. However, designating the next CDS underscores the government's resolve to revitalise the armed forces to ward off / face new challenges to national security.

The environmental opposition to Theaterisation is more due to lack of any serious prior deliberations on the subject and consequent absence of a guiding Vision Document, leading

to differing understanding of the concept and lack of clarity on the overall architecture to be finally achieved. The apprehensions expressed by various stakeholders / analysts are but a natural resistance to change and attempts to guard their respective turfs. Most apprehensions lack conviction,

while others can be easily addressed as elaborated below:

- **The armed forces have fared well in all operations, then why is a change required now?** India fought the last conventional war in 1971, and much has changed since then in technology, threat patterns, and war fighting. From an inferior Pakistan, the major threat is now from China (an emerging super power), and that too in collusion with Pakistan, making a two front spectre with a much superior adversary a near reality for India. Much was found lacking in coordination between the three Services during Kargil, and even now during the face off at LAC. The stringent operations against terrorists, and successful surgical strikes in Uri and Balakot,

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may be an indication of improving political resolve, but are hardly a measure of overall combat readiness and effectiveness of Indian Armed Forces. The not so integrated Higher Defence Organisation (HDO), the urge to guard turf and remain in respective Service silos, making do with immense equipment hollowness, and general lack lustre approach to adopt / graduate to modern war fighting technologies, are enough indications and imperatives to bring in progressive changes to an outdated war machine! Since future wars will require 'whole of Nation approach', Theaterisation may be the way forward!

- **Is it a right time to change when India is beset with myriad security challenges?⁴**

Change is always dictated by dynamism of the environment, and procrastination can only be to the peril of the affected. Moreover, Theaterisation involves a major mental and structural change that will not happen overnight. It would require due deliberations and planning, and execution may have to be undertaken in phases which may be spread over years. So the process should not be deferred. Only balance needs to be retained all through, to address any eventuality during the period of change.

- **Is the concept of Theaterisation relevant for India, or are we blindly copying the models of others?** India today faces a stretch in three different directions viz. the Chinese in the North & East, Pakistan in the West, and the maritime threat along its entire coastline. All the three areas are widely separated with still large stretches of tenuous communication infrastructure, have distinct topographical and terrain characteristics, and

are also very different in terms of demography and area development. As such, today these have become three distinct Theatres faced with different adversaries and / or challenges to contend with in different ways and with different methodologies and equipment. India's military resources are currently far out-numbered and out-weighed against the collusive threat. Theaterisation, therefore, could be the best choice to synergise its limited resources, as also adopt and adapt to new generation warfare.

- **Is an Air Defence Command really required?⁵** The IAF is saddled with the responsibility of Air Defence of India, and

it is doing the same very meticulously despite the Air Defence resources being spread geographically and placed under command of other Services / establishments. As per the experts, once all the Air Defence Resources are fully net-worked, Air Defence

becomes a procedural issue for which a separate Air Defence Command is not required. The current Air Chief has himself recently stated that offensive air operations can't be separated from Air Defence, and an integrated approach is desirable.⁶

- **The IAF seems to be having reservations regarding the process of Theaterisation.⁷**

What are their apprehensions? Are these real, or can these be managed? The IAF's apprehension / contention that it is not amenable to Theaterisation due to its scarce resources which need to remain centrally controlled for optimum use, may not be totally technically correct. Presently too, the IAF's resources during peace time are divided and allocated to five operational commands viz. Southern, South Western, Western, Central

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and Eastern. During operations, the Air Chief / Air HQs may change the allocations between commands as per requirements, and Command HQs continue to retain freedom of planning, and getting the missions executed through the air bases and squadrons. As such, if the sanctity of air commands / air component commanders is maintained in Theaterisation, there should be little change to the existing methodology, except that in place of Air Chief / Air HQs, the CoSC may be taking the decision of allocation / re-allocation of air resources, that too with the expertise and advice of the Air Chief who is a member of the CoSC. However, there is also a strong school of thought that structural changes in our drive for Theaterisation, must be preceded by a clear enunciation of doctrinal thoughts that encompass the characteristic ethos and well proven concepts of each Service. Particularly important is the point whether it is prudent to parcel out the limited IAF resources vis-à-vis using these as a cohesive punch afforded by the versatility of modern aerial platforms.

The Proposed Way Ahead

Theaterisation would be a major change for the Indian Armed Forces, which should definitely mitigate the current and imminent challenges faced by the nation, as also support India's medium and long term geo-political and geo-strategic aspirations. It should, therefore, be undertaken with due deliberation, fore-thought and caution, where each aspect is critically analysed to facilitate smooth transition. Also it takes a long time to change the military's equipment profile, and requires an equally long time and effort to synchronise and train on the procedures and drills to perfection. Under the circumstances, where there are umpteen number of challenges as also some organisational reservations cum resistance, a top driven approach with '*Make haste Slowly*'⁸ mantra, wherein the change gets implemented in

phases within stipulated timelines, as suggested below may be the best option.

Step 1: Empower the Enabler – The CDS.

Post 1971, since India did not face any major conventional war, the three Services evolved in respective silos. The appointment of CDS was created after a lot of deliberations to bring in the required integration and synergy amongst the three Services to face the emerging challenges to national security. The prime challenge that India faces today is the threat to its territorial integrity. China and Pakistan are well identified adversaries, and their collusivity against India too is a near certainty because of their common interests. Therefore, the threat along any frontier – land or coastal (or any theatre), would need an integrated plan – not only in allocation / distribution of resources, but also in execution of operations. As such, the proposed Theatre Commanders too would be fighting an integrated battle against common adversaries. Therefore, the post of CDS (as part of CoSC) with full operational control over theatres, and full administrative control over the armed forces through the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), may be an imperative at this juncture to facilitate the process of integration and theaterisation. The disparate functioning of the three Service Chiefs in the CoSC may not suffice during any future conflict! The direct Govt control over Theatre Commanders may only be needed much later when India emerges as a powerful military nation, and desires to undertake expeditionary operations, wherein the Theatres Commanders could be assigned exclusive Out of Area Contingency (OOAC) tasks by the Govt (In this context also refer to the US Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986⁹, which was brought in to change the control over US Theatre Commanders with global mandate). Moreover, the Indian Armed Forces have always adhered to the constitutional dictate of accepting political supremacy. Therefore, the govt too needs to enable the CDS and the armed forces to evolve as per emerging threats and needs of the Nation.

Step 2: Drafting of the National Security Strategy (NSS), Military Security Strategy (MSS) & Vision Document of Theaterisation:

- **NSS.** Forethought about an imminent / future development or threat, and making of a timely 'Strategy and Plan' to tackle it, has been a general weakness of the Indian system. The concept of 'Strategic Fore-Thought' seems to be missing. This is the basic reason for a 'reactive approach' in almost all situations. Even in the military, whether it was Kargil or now the LAC face-off, the response has been totally reactive! Despite fighting numerous wars with our adversaries, and facing the wrath of ever ongoing proxy war, India till date has not been able to draft and issue a NSS, a document which should be specifying various threats, the organisational structures required to tackle these, the funding for timely acquisition of resources, and lateral linkages with various ministries and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) for smooth functioning of the armed forces. There are divergent views with regard to issuance of a written NSS in the political, diplomatic, bureaucratic and military circles with regard to maintenance of ambiguity or otherwise in the ongoing troubled times. However, when the ambiguity / absence of clear cut strategy begins to impact national security and impair domestic functioning, it should be time to act with due haste. The NSS can always be in two parts – open and closed portions, which may meet both requirements, firstly of expressing Indian view to the global community in the open portion, and secondly of Spelling out Internal Reforms and Capacity Building

There exists a need to also have something like a National War Centre, where all stakeholders (various ministries, Central Security Establishments and CAPFs) need to sit together with the armed forces to plan and fight / support a unified battle, as applicable to each.

Measures in the closed portion. So the NSS should logically be issued earliest to enable the process of and progression to Theaterisation. And the NSS should thus include necessary directions for the following aspects indicated above:

- **HDO Reforms.** HDO reforms ought to be a pre-cursor to Theatre Commands Reforms and War Fighting Function Reforms, especially with respect to the following:-
 - Fixing of the responsibility and accountability for 'Defence of India'.
 - Inclusion of the CDS and other CoSC members into the National Decision making apparatus.
 - The Chain of Command for the Theatre Commanders.
 - Streamlining of the Acquisition Processes, with stringent measures as regards timelines and accountability aspects.
- **National War Centre.** The multi-domain warfare supported by technology, has made 'whole of nation approach' an imperative to address the national security challenges. As such, there exists a need to also have something like a National War Centre, where all stakeholders (various ministries, Central Security Establishments and CAPFs) need to sit together with the armed forces to plan and fight / support a unified battle, as applicable to each.
- **MSS.** Despite the Indo-China war of 1962 and unsettled borders, the Indian Armed Forces somehow for long remained focussed largely on Pakistan, and being conventionally superior stayed glued to the number game and a strategy of attrition warfare. Now

with China emerging as a major threat, a realisation has dawned to re-structure, re-orient and re-equip to face a superior and modernised adversary. The face-off at LAC has already forced re-balancing and re-orientation of forces and resources. The 'Two Front Threat' has now assumed reality. Under no circumstances can India hope to achieve parity against a collusive threat. So while India would need

to prepare for a two front threat, it would be prudent to strategise to fight only One Front War at a time. And with limited resources, the military aims too would need to be redefined. As such, a Military Security Strategy also needs to be drafted in sync with the NSS, giving out the military threats, strategy

to address these threats and structural changes and capacities required, followed by Joint Doctrines and War Fighting methodologies. Such a document will not only indicate the military limitations and needs to the political hierarchy, but will also serve as a guiding document for Theaterisation.

- **Vision Document of Theaterisation.** Simultaneously, a detailed Vision Document (Blue Print) of Theaterisation, which gives out the final desired architecture of the Indian Armed Forces, needs to be prepared (after fresh inclusive deliberations to arrive at the most suitable model), in sync with the NSS and MSS, so that the way ahead is clearly stated, and all apprehensions too are put to rest.

Step 3: Creation of the Supporting Structures / Establishments. The current debate and deliberations on Theaterisation seem to be largely

concentrated on spans of control and resource allocation to Theatre Commands. There is also a talk to say that Theatre Commanders would primarily concentrate on operations, and may not be burdened with administrative responsibilities; the Raise, Train and Sustain functions would continue to remain with the respective Service Chiefs; and scarce Force Multipliers viz. Cyber, Space and Special Forces may necessarily remain under centralised control in the functional integration mode.

Accordingly, the re-modelling of the Controlling HQs (HQ IDS and Service HQs) and Support Structures, which would be expected to support the entire edifice of prospective Theatre Commands, should assume primacy and priority to enable a smooth transition to Theaterisation. So the third step should logically include the following:-

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- Re-structuring of HQ IDS to support the CDS, re-modelled CoSC and the Theatre Commands.
- Re-structuring of the three Service HQs to avoid duplicity and integrate with HQ IDS and each other.
- Creation of Tri-Services Training, Logistics and Administrative Grid that would support all the Services and Theatres (by amalgamation / re-structuring of all such Establishments of the three Services), and specifying their command & control chains.
- Alongside, streamlining of the functioning of DRDO, OFB and Defence Industry to be more responsive to the needs of the Armed Forces, along the guidelines of 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' initiative, would be an imperative too.

Step 4: Raising of Theatre Commands. The creation of Theatre Commands should be the last step in the whole process to ensure that the ‘operational readiness’ is not dented during the entire process, and all support structures are already in place to be responsive to demands and need of the Theatre Commands, the moment these are created.

Proposed Model of Theaterisation

The proposed organisational structures can be seen overleaf. Few noteworthy aspects are given below:

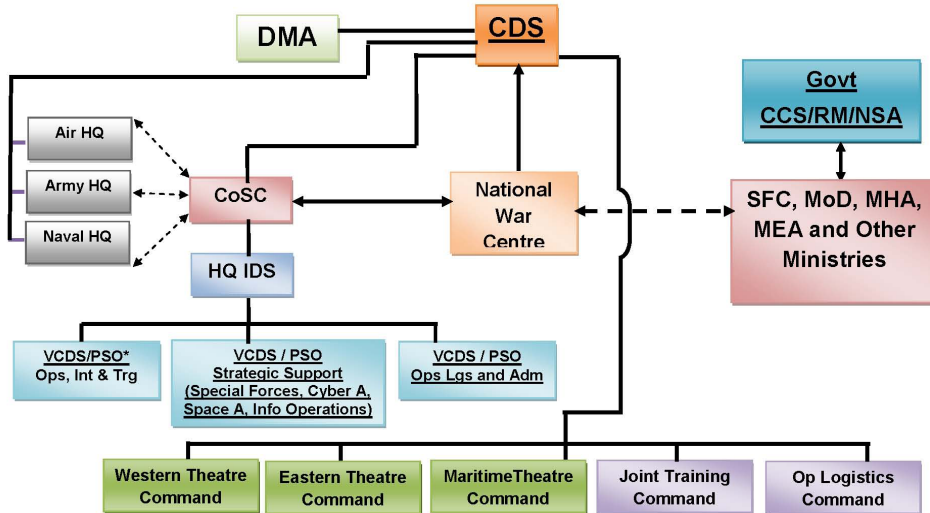
- **National War Centre.** Since all future conflicts (Grey Zone or Conventional) would be across multiple domains and need a ‘Whole of Nation Approach’, a National War Centre may be an essential forum / requirement to congregate and co-opt all stakeholders into the national effort.
- **Re-modelled HQ IDS.**
 - Apart from heading HQ IDS, the CISC could also help to reduce the workload of the CDS in the DMA.
 - The three proposed VCDS/PSOs would overlook staff aspects of all major operational verticals viz. VCDS (Operations, Intelligence and Training), VCDS (Strategic Support consisting of Special Forces, Defence Cyber Agency and Defence Space Agency) and VCDS (Operational Logistics and Administration).
- **Theatre Commands.** Only three operational Theatre Commands are proposed which would enable an integrated and synergised approach to address the three primary threats viz. Western Theatre Command to address Pakistan, Eastern Theatre Command to address China and Maritime Theatre Command to address all types of maritime threats.

- Within each Theatre Command, the sanctity of certain existing Commands of all three Services have been retained to ensure minimal turbulence and facilitate smooth transition for early stabilisation (this could then be modified as per felt needs later as the system matures).
- Further, Sub-Theatres proposed within Western and Eastern Theatre Commands would help to cope with the challenges of terrain and geographical extent of theatres, as also enable detailed coordination at operational and tactical levels between the ground and air forces.
- And there should be a plan to create a Strategic Force Command in a later time frame to include all force multipliers viz. Long Range Vectors – Missiles and Rockets (LRVs), Special Forces, Cyber Agency, Space Agency and Information Operations.
- **Functional Commands.** Two functional commands viz. Joint Training Command and Operational Logistics Command, have been proposed to meet the operational needs of the Theatre Commands, considering that other service specific needs of raise, train and sustain would be met by the respective re-modelled Service HQs.

Conclusion

The PLA is acquiring humongous capabilities, and Xi Jinping is now aggressively and effectively utilising its military might to coerce and intimidate India. Pakistan, which has never missed an opportunity of military adventurism, too is fast building up its military might with the support of China to bridge the conventional asymmetry enjoyed by India till now. It is, therefore, time that Indian Armed Forces undertake the required re-structuring and build capacities to preserve the sovereignty and safeguard the territorial integrity of the country.

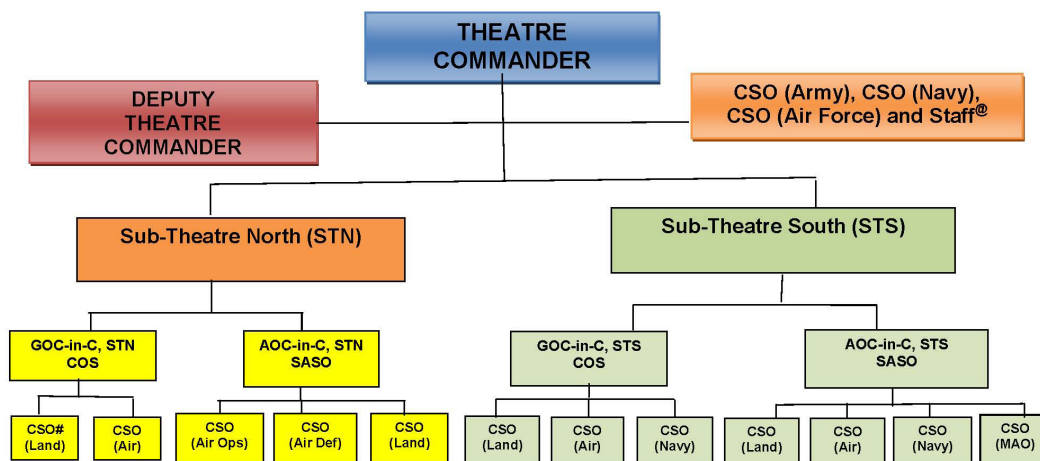
CDS, RE-MODELLED HQ IDS AND THEATRE COMMANDS



Notes

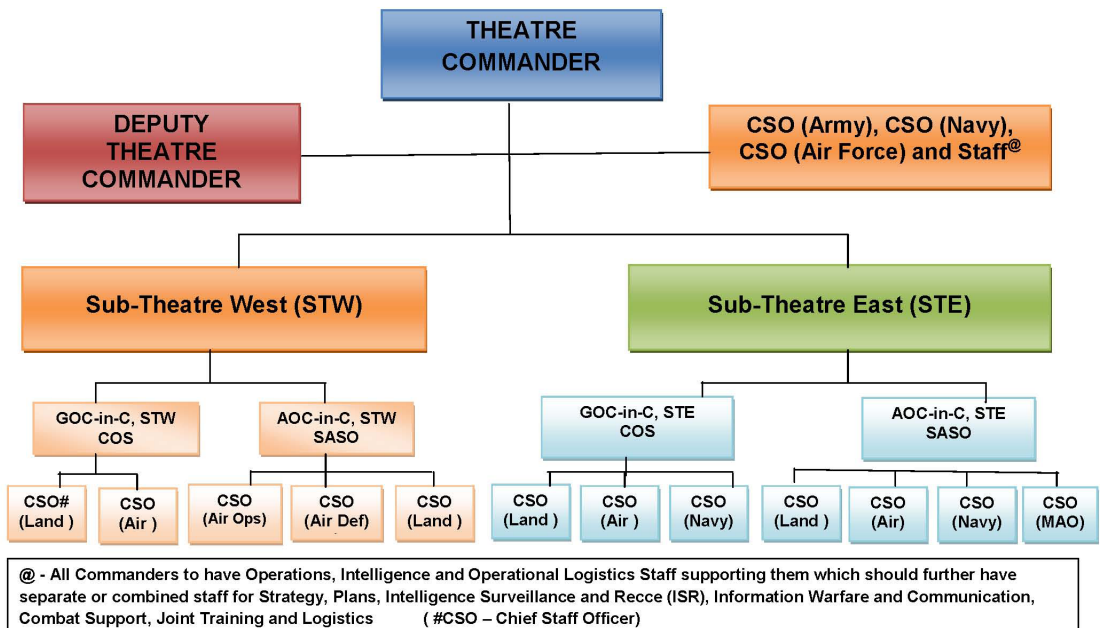
1. CDS to be Permanent Chairman of CoSC with full Operational and Administrative control over entire Armed Forces.
 2. CISC could also be the Secretary, DMA.
 3. CDS/ CoSC to exercise control over Theatre Commands.
 4. Service HQ to only be responsible for Raise, Train & Sustain.
 5. Aspects of Operations, Intelligence, Strategic Support, Training & Op Logistics to be controlled and coordinated by remodelled HQ IDS.
- * VCDS/PSO – Vice Chief of Defence Staff/ Principal Staff Officer

WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND

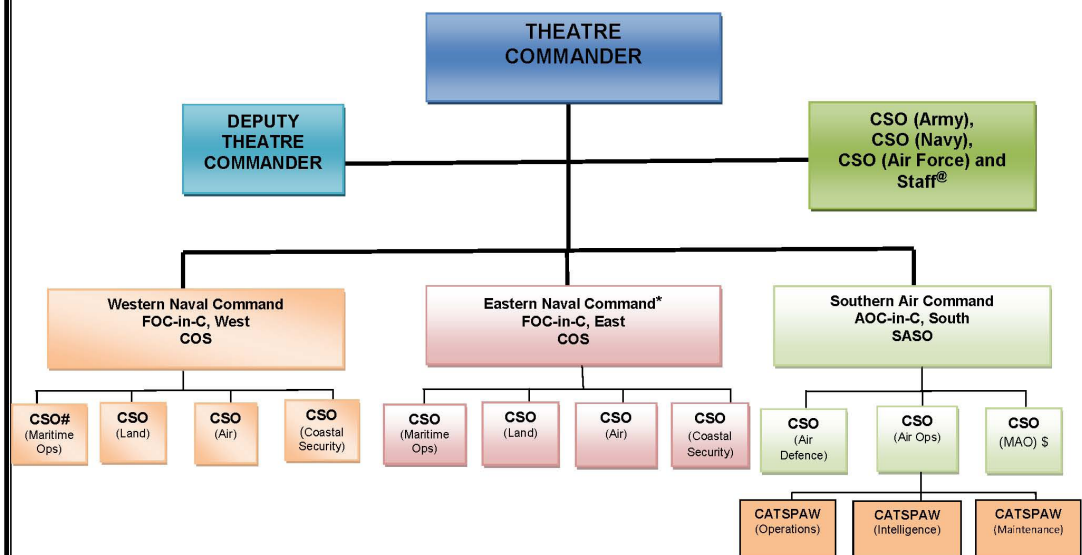


@ - All Commanders to have Operations, Intelligence and Operational Logistics Staff supporting them which should further have separate or combined staff for Strategy, Plans, Intelligence Surveillance and Recce (ISR), Information Warfare and Communication, Combat Support, Joint Training and Logistics. (# CSO – Chief Staff Officer)

EASTERN THEATRE COMMAND



MARITIME THEATRE COMMAND



* ANC (Andaman & Nicobar Command) to be placed under Eastern Naval Command (may make independent later post capability enhancement) .

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End Notes

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