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Issue Brief

Fostering Joint Warfighting: India's Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations 2025

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Summary

The Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations seeks to bridge the doctrinal gap that has hindered jointness among the Indian Armed Forces. Following the adoption of this joint doctrine, enhanced inter-service interoperability would synergise the planning and efficient conduct of joint operations.

Introduction

The Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) released the Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations on 27 August 2025. This doctrine aims to enhance jointness by improving inter-service interoperability in airborne (AB) and heliborne (HB) operations to enhance operational effectiveness.¹ In his introduction to the doctrine, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan highlights the implications of service-centric constraints on operational effectiveness. He underlines the fact that

The individual services have their own Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and corresponding manuals, which do not sufficiently address the joint planning and coordination needed for seamless execution of AB/ HB operations. This doctrinal gap may hamper operational effectiveness.²

This gap prevents the desired function in both the planning and execution of AB and HB operations. The document released by HQ IDS aims to fill this doctrinal gap in AB/HB operations by formulating standard operating procedures.

Joint Doctrines and the Indian Armed Forces

To meet the challenges of transformed modern warfare, the Indian Armed Forces are undergoing a significant transformation to achieve jointness in military operations, “which implies or denotes possessing an optimised capability to engage in Joint War-Fighting”.³ The HQ IDS was established in 2001, with one of its mandates being to formulate these principles as joint doctrines to foster jointmanship in the armed forces.⁴ In 2017, the Headquarters released the first two joint doctrines—‘Joint Doctrine for Indian Armed Forces’ and ‘Joint Armed Forces Training Doctrine’.⁵ In 2025, the HQ IDS released six unclassified versions of joint doctrines covering joint operations across domains such as cyberspace, amphibious, airborne, heliborne, multi-domain and Special Forces (SF).

While these eight doctrines relating to jointness are in the open domain, other classified doctrines include the Joint Doctrines for the Indian Armed Forces (2006),⁶

¹ [“Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations”](#), Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, 27 August 2025, p. iv.

² Ibid.

³ [“Joint Doctrine for Indian Armed Forces”](#), Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, 2017.

⁴ Satish Dua, [“HQ Integrated Defence Staff in the National Security Structure”](#), *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, July–September 2019, pp. 53–69.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anil Chopra, [“Role of the Air Element and the Way Ahead to Enhance and Facilitate Jointmanship”](#), *Defstrat*, Vol. 15, Issue 4 (Sep-Oct 2021), 30 September 2021.

Perception Management and Psychological Operations (2010),⁷ Land and Air Operations (2010),⁸ Cyberspace Operations (2024)⁹ and Amphibious Operations (2024).¹⁰ Similarly, the Joint Military Space Doctrine was prepared in 2025, but its unclassified version has yet to be released.

Jointness and AB/HB Operations

The AB/HB operations are conducted when operational access to the area where the operation is to be undertaken is controlled or denied, either because it is in hostile enemy territory or because it is inaccessible.¹¹ To overcome these limitations, AB/HB operations are used to gain operational access to the target area.¹² These operations are mainly conducted to achieve the objective by controlling lodgment to bypass resistance, thereby directly tackling the issue or assisting friendly forces in targeting the adversary's centre of gravity (COG).¹³ An enemy's COG can have strategic, operational or tactical value.¹⁴

The concept of manoeuvre is applied in these operations, where deception and surprise, flexibility, adaptability, terrain and speed are closely tied to the AB/HB forces' manoeuvre if and when these operations involve at least two services.¹⁵ The need for integrated command and control across all three services arises for the successful planning and conduct of AB/HB operations.

At least two different services need to operate together in coordination, with proper planning and execution, to foster the surprise element, maintain heightened situational awareness for militaries in the modern era, ensure the effective utilisation of available resources across all services for the mission, and, notably, support joint command and control (C2) structures. The Joint C2 is the enabler of these operations, where directing, planning, coordinating and controlling will be done jointly.

⁷ Venkatesh Nayak, [“Disclosure of Defence Forces’ Joint Operational Doctrines in 7-year old RTI Case Sought”](#), *Counterreview*, 4 October 2018.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ [“CDS Gen Anil Chauhan Releases Joint Doctrine for Cyberspace Operations”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 18 June 2024.

¹⁰ [“CDS Gen Anil Chauhan Releases Joint Doctrine for Amphibious Operations”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 9 September 2024.

¹¹ [“Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations”](#), no. 2, p. 7; [“FM 3-99 Airborne and Air Assault Operations”](#), Headquarters Department of Army, Washington DC, Field Manual No. 3-99, p. 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Centre of Gravity means those characteristics, capabilities, or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight. See Joe Strange and Richard Iron, [“Understanding Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities”](#), Australian Defence College, *The Forge*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Strange and Iron, [“Understanding Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities”](#), p. 3.

¹⁵ [“Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations”](#), no. 1, p. 37.

Multi-Service Nature

The nature of an AB and HB operation is fundamentally multi-service, as it is conducted across multiple domains, such as air, land, sea, cyber and space.¹⁶ Therefore, they are meant to be planned and conducted as joint operations, where the air movement element (from mounting to pre-landing at the objective area) goes to the Indian Air Force (IAF)¹⁷ and the land/sea movement (post-landing) goes to the concerned domain, i.e., the Indian Army/Indian Navy,¹⁸ as per the requirements. However, these joint operations have been planned and executed in the past with a temporary joint understanding among the services, when one service needs the other for the operation. As Gen Chauhan pointed out, the Indian Armed Forces have faced structural constraints in planning and executing joint operations because each service operates according to its own SOPs, based on its distinctive service doctrine.¹⁹ Thus, having a joint doctrine for such demanding integrated operations—where all land, air, sea, cyber, and space elements are integrated in both physical and virtual domains—would help overcome these hurdles.

Joint Command and Control (C2)

Underscoring the nature of these operations, there is a need for a well-structured, joint C2 structure to bring a joint approach to multi-service operations. The operations process involves directives, planning, coordination and control at three levels: strategic, operational and tactical. These levels need to have joint C2 structures. This arrangement would enhance overall operational efficiency, as the concerned authorities would be mandated to carry out the operation with integrated planning and resources.

Effective Utilisation of Specialised Resources

In the Indian Armed Forces, each force has its own expertise. The Indian Army (IA) has expertise in land operations, with supporting components in air, cyber and space power, including air defence systems, helicopters and missiles. The Indian Air Force (IAF) has expertise in air and space power, while the Indian Navy (IN) has expertise in sea power. It has to be noted that no single service can make up for the exceptional capabilities of other services in their areas of knowledge or bypass/manage them without assistance from each other in joint operations, especially in AB/HB operations.

For example, the IA does not possess the authorisation to operate C-17 or other transport or fighter assets, as it is the IAF's mandate; therefore, one service would

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 25, 33, 34.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 31, 34.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. iv.

need another to plan and execute these operations. The same is for the IAF's role in Suppression/Destruction of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD/DEAD) capabilities and other elements to gain air superiority over the adversary. The Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) of the IAF provides integrated command and control for all aspects of India's airpower capabilities. Therefore, the resources (human, equipment, etc.) of one service can help others in such scenarios, and jointness will foster interoperability among the three services to enable effective utilisation of these resources.

Preserving Surprise in an Era of Transparent Battlefield

The success of AB/HB operations depends on speed and secrecy to surprise the adversary.²⁰ The selection of the correct route, time and place, along with rapid movement/mobility, and the application of specific camouflage, concealment and deception (CCD) measures, is essential to maintain surprise through manoeuvre. It is crucial to understand that one of the significant changes in the modern era is the increase in battlefield transparency (BFT) or situational awareness, which has posed challenges in the planning and execution of military operations, especially in AB/HB operations.

The increased BFT has affected operational secrecy, prompting the planners and executors to be more deliberate in their planning and execution. Therefore, if joint guidance, structures, planning and execution elements are in place, it would foster jointness and maintain the element of surprise.

These four elements address the argument for the importance of jointness for AB/HB operations. They could be addressed by filling the doctrinal gap within the armed forces through the adoption of a joint doctrine for these specialised operations.²¹

Salient Features of the Joint Doctrine

As discussed in the previous section, the joint doctrine aims to fill the doctrinal gap among the armed forces by introducing joint guidelines for the synchronised conduct of AB/HB operations. The objective of this doctrine is to improve the interoperability in such missions. Though the role of air power is limited to supporting actual AB/HB operations, its strategic importance is pivotal in these operations. It depends on the mission type, environment and the availability of relevant resources, among other factors.²²

²⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

²¹ Ibid., p. iv.

²² Ibid.

The doctrinal gaps among the distinctive in-service doctrines are mainly due to the nature and scope of each service's duties. The IA doctrine (2004) highlights that “the Indian Army is the land component of the Indian Armed Forces”.²³ Therefore, most of the doctrinal and organisational orientation remains for the land warfare component. The same applies to the other two services and their components. As the CDS highlights, this doctrinal gap prevents seamless joint planning and coordination.

The HQ IDS has demarcated the joint guidelines and structures for AB/ HB operations in this doctrine. It has outlined three levels of joint command and control (C2): strategic, operational and tactical, with the level of C2 depending on the type, magnitude and significance of the AB/HB operation. The joint guidance for AB/HB operations is clearly highlighted in the doctrine. The inception of these operations would be through a joint initiating directive (JID) issued by an apex-mandated C2 authority, followed by a planning directive (PD), then a joint outline plan (JIP) and, lastly, the operational orders. These directives, plans and orders would be derived based on the mission's levels.

Mandate for Joint Command and Control for AB/HB Operations

The military operations are conducted by the mandated command and control (C2) centres (as per the level of mission). These C2 centres are responsible for issuing directives based on the plans to be made, followed by the employment of forces to execute these campaigns. The Joint Doctrine for AB/HB operations also mandates specific joint C2 centres for such operations.

At the strategic level, responsibility lies with the Joint Operations Committee (JOCOM), comprising the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and HQ IDS. JOCOM issues the Joint Initiating Directive (JID), which provides the strategic context, mission objectives, political intent and allocation of tri-service resources. This ensures that all three services begin the planning process with a shared operational picture and common priorities—addressing the longstanding problem of divergent service doctrines. For operationally smaller missions, Service Headquarters (SHQs) may issue the JID, following the same principles.

Once the JID is received, SHQs prepare Planning Directives (PDs) for the respective Command HQs.²⁴ These PDs specify the mission, available resources, and operational restrictions and nominate the component commanders who will lead their respective forces in the joint AB/HB task force. The structured nomination of the AB/HB Force Commander, Transport Support Force Commander, Air Transport

²³ [“Indian Army Doctrine”](#), Headquarter Army Training Command, 22 October 2004, p. 9.

²⁴ [“Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations”](#), no. 1, p. 27.

Force Commander, Type Force Commander and Ground/Maritime Force Commander clarifies responsibilities and reduces inter-service ambiguity.

The Joint Planning HQ (JPHQ) at the Command level then produces the Joint Outline Plan (JOP), a comprehensive operational blueprint integrating the JID and PD. It lays out the mission analysis, ISR inputs, C2 framework, timelines, and concealment, camouflage and deception (CCD) measures—reflecting the doctrine’s emphasis on maintaining surprise amid modern battlefield transparency.²⁵ Subsequently, the Joint Planning Cell (JPC) at the mounting base develops service-specific operational orders in coordination with component commanders. The JPC acts as the central C2 node during execution, ensuring synchronisation across all phases of the operation.

Overall, the doctrine enhances jointness by institutionalising unified C2 and ensuring tri-service resource optimisation. By replacing ad hoc coordination with structured joint planning, the doctrine significantly improves interoperability and operational effectiveness in India’s AB/HB operations. Recent joint airborne exercises, such as ‘MaruJwala’, will no doubt help facilitate the institutional absorption of this doctrine.²⁶ The exercises conducted in Rajasthan involved the IA and the IAF as part of Ex Trishul, during which joint AB operations were performed. Both services were engaged in joint planning and execution, as well as in new-generation Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs).

Conclusion

The Indian Armed Forces have been working to achieve jointness through joint doctrines. The Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations is one of them. The nature of these operations demands synchronised efforts from all three services, but doctrinal gaps have hampered joint operational effectiveness. Moreover, joint command and control restraints, ineffective optimisation of tri-service resources, and the surprise element were also among the leading issues. Therefore, the Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations seeks to fill the gap by introducing joint guidelines and structures for these operations. The jointness achieved through the doctrine would enhance interoperability among the Indian Armed Forces, thereby improving operational effectiveness.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁶ Sandip Dighe, [“Indian Army, IAF Conduct Large-scale Airborne Exercise Near Pakistan Border”](#), *The Times of India*, 13 November 2025.

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