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मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

MP-IDSA
Commentary

Fostering Joint Warfighting: India's Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations

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March 03, 2026

Summary

The Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations seeks to create multi-domain operational capabilities.

The Indian Armed Forces have been making efforts to achieve jointness for optimal operational effectiveness.[1] The formation of the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) was one such key step. As technology evolves rapidly, however, modern warfare is changing, and the number of domains in which wars are fought has also increased.[2] While land, air and sea are the three traditional warfighting domains, space, cyber and cognitive have emerged as three new domains.[3]

Satellites that enable dual-use communications, navigation and surveillance are vulnerable to kinetic and non-kinetic attacks.[4] Cyber domain has become critical to the Indian military, as it facilitates network integration and equipment operations, stores and shares classified information, and establishes secure communications. This domain is equally vulnerable to cyberattacks and espionage.[5] The cognitive domain has been revolutionised by the rise of social media and internet-based information engines.[6] The infusion of dis/misinformation with these sources influences the cognitive abilities of the military commanders and the general public. It is worth noting that the cyber and cognitive domains are independent of geography. Therefore, they require more deliberation as the threat perception is unlimited.

On 27 August 2025, the HQ IDS released the unclassified version of the Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations. The document notes that Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) "refers to the coordinated, integrated and synchronised employment of military forces and non-military national capabilities across Land, Sea, Air, Space, Cyber and Cognitive domains".[7] The Joint Doctrine recognises that the character of war is rapidly changing due to technological upgradation and the evolving security environment.[8]

MDO Characteristics

There are ten characteristics flagged in the MDO doctrine.[9] They suggest an integrated multi-domain command and control (C2) to enable cross-domain integration and collaboration among the military and civil partners at the national level, achieving enhanced interoperability and a high degree of operational efficiency

[1] Satish Dua, **"HQ Integrated Defence Staff in the National Security Structure"**, *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2019, pp. 53–69; Manish Kumar, **"Fostering Joint Warfighting: India's Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations 2025"**, Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 27 November 2025.

[2] **"Joint Doctrine for Multi Domain Operations"**, Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 27 August 2025, p. 4.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., p. 7.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid, p. 9.

[8] Ibid., pp. 3–4.

[9] Ibid., p. 16.

with convergent effects. This will be achieved through improved situational awareness, non-linearity in decentralised Operating Environment (OE) with parallel operations across domains, centralisation of networks and data, information superiority, and agility and adaptability among stakeholders.

Therefore, the focus of this commentary is on integrating the military with dual-use civil capabilities in all six domains for all three layers of the OE—physical, virtual and social, for a common all-domain operational picture (CADOP). Stakeholders essential to MDO include the armed forces, police, paramilitary forces, intelligence agencies, research institutes, and other government and private players across all domains.[10]

Mandate for MDO

The Indian Armed Forces are responsible for the MDO. The Multi-Domain Operations Room (MDOR) is mandated to carry out these operations. It is responsible for necessary actions across all military and non-military stakeholders to develop CADOP and to bring inter-agency coordination, decision-making and intelligence sharing. It is to underscore that the MDOs are not purely military-based. However, they are definitely joint operations, but the joint operations among forces are not the MDOs.

MDO versus Joint Operations

The doctrine argues that MDOs are distinct from Joint Operations, in which the latter remains committed to achieving synergy only among the three domains. In contrast, the former is committed to the six domains. It states that MDOs are Joint Operations, but not vice versa. In his introductory remarks, India's Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Anil Chauhan, highlights that

> Unlike Joint Operations, which primarily coordinate military efforts of the armed forces, MDO seeks to integrate and synchronise actions across all domains, in sync with multiple military and our non-military partners.[11]

The CDS suggests that joint operations are limited to the three services. In contrast, MDOs are conducted with a Whole of Nation Approach (WONA), which seeks to integrate all kinetic, non-kinetic and cross-domain components of military and civil agencies for the success of an MDO. The distinction between MDO and joint operations relate to the space in which they are conducted, the entities involved, decision-making and the operational picture. As discussed, MDOs integrate military

[10] Ibid., p. 10.

[11] Ibid., p. iii.

and non-military entities, whereas joint operations are purely military. Another key difference is that the former is based on WONA, while the latter is a whole-of-military approach.

Operation Sindoor and MDO

India launched *Operation Sindoor* post-Pahalgam terrorist attack. India successfully used land, air, sea, cyber, space and cognitive components to attain the desired objectives. The operation involved not just the armed forces, but also civil agencies and population as key stakeholders, i.e., WONA. The Indian Army (IA) Artillery Regiments, which constitute the land component, hit targets through their 155 mm M777 howitzers.[12] Targets were hit using air components of the IA and Indian Air Force (IAF), such as kamikaze drones and missiles fired from its fighter jets, respectively. The Indian Navy was also deployed near the Pakistan coastal range. While the escalation ladder did not extend to the point of use of naval power, the naval deployment did play a deterrent role.

India's space assets were used for optical imagery for target identification (Cartosat), radar imagery for enemy movement (RISAT), communications (GSAT-7), and most importantly, supporting navigation for drones, missiles, aircraft, etc., with geo-location data (NavIC).[13] The cyber power, through electronic warfare, was used to penetrate Pakistani air defence (AD) systems (suppression of enemy air defence/SEAD) and defuse drones through soft kill (through D4 system). Lastly, as for the cognitive domain, an intangible factor in warfare, battlefield transparency has increased its impact through open-source intelligence (OSINT). There is no doubt disinformation has also become a part of cognitive warfare (CW) targeting stakeholders and the general public, even as India produced evidence of terrorists and military infrastructure being destroyed. The need to harness OSINT to deny adversaries CW opportunities though is a key understanding that needs to be strengthened.

Conclusion

The MDO doctrine is intended to enable stakeholders across military and non-military entities to foster India's joint warfighting capabilities across all six domains, i.e., land, sea, air, space, cyber and cognitive. The WONA through civil military fusion (CMF) is the key concept for bridging these gaps and enabling interoperability between the forces and civil partners. There is a need to harness OSINT for achieving CW ends. Effective inter-agency coordination is meanwhile essential to improve the efficacy of MDO further.

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[12] Manish Kumar, **"Operation Sindoor: Drawing Lessons for India and Pakistan"**, *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2026, pp. 549–582.

[13] Ibid., p. 562.

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