From the Desk of India's First Theatre Commander

Anil Ahuja*

This communiqué originates from the desk of India's first Theatre Commander, assuming the operationalisation of an Integrated Theatre Command (ITC) along the northern borders. It provides a resumé of the journey spanning over two decades towards the formal creation of a theatre command (assumed). This perspective piece outlines the longstanding structural weaknesses that have hampered combat effectiveness, including divergent interpretation of loosely defined national defence strategy, fragmented planning, compartmentalised resource utilisation, lack of integrated intelligence and the non-existence of a single authority to institutionally coordinate individual service plans. It emphasises that integration forms the essential foundation for effective theatre commands. Against the backdrop of the possible options explored, this perspective piece recommends a phased evolution of theatre commands with interim structures to be refined progressively. Phase 1, which entails every service honing its own operational plans and their integration into coordinated theatre-level plans, is recommended to be completed during the period 2026–2028. Single-service commands have been recommended to be retained during this phase, with Theatre Command HQ superimposed. The Theatre Commander will be vested with enhanced authority to enforce synergy while preserving core service competencies. Salient aspects to be

* Lt Gen Anil Ahuja, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM & Bar (Retd) is a former Deputy Chief of Integrated Defence Staff for Policy Planning and Force Development.

ISSN 0976-1004 (print); 2583-7567 (online)
© 2026 Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
Journal of Defence Studies, Vol. 20, No. 3, July-September 2026, pp. 13–25

deliberated in the run-up to Phase 2 have been identified, in particular, the aspect of the chain of command and the higher defence organisation, for progressive refinement during subsequent phases.

Keywords: *Indian Military Reforms; Jointness to Integration; Theaterisation; Interim structure-Theatre Commands; Reorganisation Indian Armed Forces*

Assumption

From the news emanating from various quarters, India may announce the creation of the long-debated integrated theatre commands any day. That day may even be before the publication of this journal issue. **The author assumes that this has already happened.**

This communiqué originates from the desk of the first Theatre Commander (Lt General/Air Marshal XXX), dated XXX. Addressed to his command and to the defence and security watchers. It describes the journey to, and the rationale for the creation of India's first integrated theatre command, its interim structure, as implemented for now, actions required to mature the organisation suited to India's operational and economic environment, and the possible refinements to the organisation going ahead.

Introduction

Congratulations on being a part of the team establishing the first Integrated Theatre Command of the Indian Armed Forces for its northern borders. This is the realisation of the longest deliberated and most consequential military reform implemented in India.

I have the privilege of being at the helm after completing my tenure as Commander of the Western Army/Air Command.

Background

For many amongst us who may not be fully aware, let me recapitulate the background and the quarter-century-long journey to the creation of the first Integrated Theatre Command (ITC) of the Indian Armed Forces.

Following the 1999 Kargil conflict, the Kargil (Conflict) Review Committee and the Group of Ministers Report in 2000–2001 highlighted the weaknesses in the functioning of the existing Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) system, the apex body binding the three services. These included its failure to provide single-point military advice to the government and to resolve substantive inter-service, planning, policy and operational issues,

essentially owing to structural limitations. The report recommended an appropriate revamp of the existing COSC System to facilitate 'Jointness' and synergy among the Defence Services.[1] For achieving this outcome, the report recommended the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).[2]

The primary rationale for this included the rendering of single-point military advice, administering the strategic forces and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process. The report stated that "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 tandem with one another in the conduct of various operational tasks, including training". This, it stated, was the demand of modern warfare. HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS), Strategic Forces Command (SFC), and the integrated Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) were created as an immediate follow-up. In the two and a half decades since then, the complexities of the technology-intensive battlefield and the need to integrate have only intensified, as has been evident during Operation Sindoor and, more recently in the US–Israel operations in Iran.

Nearly a decade later, in 2011, the Naresh Chandra Task Force, appointed to deliberate on national security issues, recommended appointing a Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) (instead of the CDS), with a fixed tenure of two years. The appointment was to be rotated among the three services. Also, the role and autonomy of the Service Chiefs were not to be affected.[3]

In continuation of the efforts directed at defence reforms, yet another expert committee, headed by Lt Gen D.B. Shekatkar (Retd), was appointed by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in 2016. It was tasked to recommend steps to enhance the combat potential of the armed forces and to 'right balance' the defence expenditure. In its report, submitted in January 2017, which has not been made public, the committee reportedly recommended (among its 99 or so recommendations) the creation of three theatre commands—a Northern Command for the China border, Western Command for the Pakistan border and Southern Command for a maritime role.[4] The committee, however, did not dwell on the methodology of this re-organisation, a task it left for the MoD and the Services to consider further.

After prolonged internal deliberations, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of the CDS on 15 August 2019. Concurrently, he asserted the need to "further sharpen coordination between the forces", which would "make the forces even more effective".

Following this announcement, the government issued a notification on 24 December 2019,[5] spelling out the charter, mandate and functions of the CDS and the newly created Department of Military Affairs (DMA). This included the mandate to establish joint/theatre commands.

Let me highlight a few salient provisions of this notification (paraphrased), as we are the most important functionaries responsible for implementing this directive.

(a) Bring about *jointness in operations*, logistics, transport, training, support services, communications, repairs and maintenance, etc., of the three Services, *within three years of the first CDS assuming office*.
(b) Facilitate restructuring of Military Commands for *optimal utilisation of resources* by bringing about jointness in operations*, including through the establishment of joint/theatre commands.*
(c) Ensure optimal *utilisation of infrastructure* and rationalise it through jointness among the services.
(d) Streamlining integration between Army and CAPFs/PMF employed along LC and LAC, and the operational channel of their command and control under the theatre commander. Independent operational and infrastructure development planning, and adherence to separate concepts of operations, can undermine effective management of disputed borders.
(e) *Promote jointness* in procurement, training and staffing for the Services through joint planning and integration of their requirements.
(f) As the Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, *administer* tri-service organisations and *command* tri-service agencies/organisations/ commands related to Cyber and Space.

This is an overview of the long journey so far, which will continue further.

Primary Rationale for Creating ITCs

There has been an intense debate over the need for and the rationale behind creating theatre commands in the Indian context. Pros and cons, individual service perspectives (including reservations), and the paucity of resources to create self-contained, independent commands have been discussed intensely. The most prevalent narrative among 'onlookers', however, has been that the overriding rationale is to create 'fewer' (3/4/5) ITCs, to replace the 17 single-service commands, none of which are co-located. In effect, however, this reduction is of negligible consequence in comparison to the need for enhancing operational efficiency and optimal utilisation of individual service resources in an integrated manner, eliminating wasteful overlaps.

As part of this organisation now, I would like each of you to be aware of the basic drawbacks that exist and need to be addressed through the newly created Integrated structure.[6] These are:

(a) The legacy practice of the service-specific interpretations of the loosely defined (not published) National Security & National Defence Policy and the operational directive issued by the Defence Minister/Raksha Mantri. Progress needs to be made towards integrated analysis and planning.

(b) Hitherto, each service has interpreted its role and asset employment according to its own doctrinal thinking. No doubt there were consultations, but these were driven mainly by individual service perceptions and biases. This has resulted in compartmentalised planning between the services, which must change.

(c) Non-existence of a single authority, at the theatre or apex level, to institutionally coordinate inter-service plans, reconciling single-service perceptions and expectations, i.e., to make each service speak a language understood by all. This authority now rests with us, at the HQ of the ITC and the CDS.

(d) Absence of a common national intelligence picture integrating inputs of all services, and other national agencies like the NTRO/ISRO, etc., and real-time intelligence sharing. This has been missing even between the services.

(e) Absence of contingency operational planning based on a visualised escalation ladder, with a distinct possibility of successive rungs of action and response straddling multiple domains, e.g., the action and response may rapidly shift between continental, air, maritime, space, cyber or even strategic domains.

(f) The inability of each service, holding scarce resources (air assets, long-range vectors and force multipliers), to shake off a sense of ownership to allow resource use by/for the other service(s)—turf guarding.

(g) Lack of coordinated, intra- and inter-service prioritised capability development and acquisition plans, resulting in sub-optimal utilisation of meagre defence budgets and inability to develop the desired threat mitigation capabilities.

(h) The non-availability of commanders and staff trained in a joint service environment to function in an integrated manner; the continued inability of the system to impart requisite training, due to lack of institutional capacity and integrated staff billets.

(i) Inadequate intra- and inter-service integration for communications, network-centric warfare and absorption of emerging technologies.

Overcoming the above-mentioned drawbacks entails optimising plans and resources of the three services, and agencies created for asymmetric domains (Defence Cyber and Space Agencies), creation of integrated AI-enabled intelligence collection, collation, analysis and decision support systems, absorption of emerging technologies and induction of interoperable tech-enabled platforms.

I remain deeply conscious that, despite the formal 'integration' of the services, due consideration must be given to the core competency, domain specialisation, resources, culture and ethos of each service. These will be optimised by us to achieve the defined politico-military objectives. As the theatre commander, I assure you of this consideration.

From Jointness to Integration

No doubt, the services have operated jointly and performed commendably in India's previous operations: the 1971 India–Pakistan War, the 1999 Kargil conflict, and more recently during Operation Sindoor. There were, however, perceptional and functional differences on account of the lack of formal integration.

Being part of the first ITC, it is imperative that each one of us clearly understands the distinction between 'jointness', 'integration' and 'theaterisation'—terms that are used interchangeably, albeit erroneously. This would also underscore the necessity of 'Integration' being the first step to 'Theaterisation'.[7]

(a) *Jointness*: It entails cross-service coordination in planning, operations, communications, training, capability development, acquisitions, and more. In implementation, *it entails operating together seamlessly while retaining individual service identity, organisational command and control construct*.

(b) *Integration*: This entails an *organisational reconfiguration merging individual service identities to achieve a cohesive construct.* The resources of the three services and the specific functional agencies/commands (Space, Cyber, electronic warfare, special operations, etc.) are amalgamated at different levels and *placed under a single commander* for the execution of assigned tasks. This enables the harnessing of operational and logistic capabilities and integration of sensors, systems and networks to create a comprehensive cross-domain picture and capability.[8]

(c) *Theaterisation*: It is the process of assigning a geographic area of responsibility to an integrated, *tri-service-plus*[9] operationally oriented formation, under a designated commander. Ideally, this formation should be operationally and logistically self-contained in resources. It should also have the capability to secure its hinterland. This entails the formulation of an integrated, theatre- specific plan, and a directive assigning missions and command responsibilities.

Our Northern ITC covers the area from eastern Ladakh to the eastern extremity of Arunachal Pradesh (nearly 3,500 km), with the responsibility of defending India's northern borders.

Options Explored for Theaterisation and the Course Adopted

Amidst the intense debate over theaterisation in recent years, three main options were explored for creating theatre commands[10]:

(a) Option 1: Create adequate building blocks for integrated tri-service organisations and make up deficiencies of major weapons and equipment before venturing into theatreisation (too time-consuming and tended to perpetuate the status quo).
(b) Option 2: Create geographic theatre commands immediately and evolve/ build resources progressively (too disruptive considering India's security environment).
(c) Option 3: Phased and incremental re-organisation from current structures. Focus on tri-service integration, progress towards creating theatre commands, refining organisations incrementally, building upon processes and resources (Adequately balanced in diligence and speed).

With due deliberation, it has been decided to adopt *Option 3*. This process will be phased, based on the objectives identified to be achieved progressively.

Phase 1, which largely entails each service further refining its own operational plans and integrating them into a coordinated theatre-level plan, will be implemented over the period 2026–28.

Interim Organisational Structure 2026–2028

The government has arrived at a unique organisational structure for Phase 1. During this phase, the single-service commands, responsible for converting

individual service plans into integrated plans, *will continue to exist*. Our Northern Theatre Command HQ is now 'superimposed' over the Army's Eastern, Central and Northern Commands and the Air Force's Eastern, Central and Western Air Commands (partially).

To carry out the task of integration effectively and with due authority, *the Theatre Commanders have been vested with a higher stature than single-service theatre commanders and delegated additional financial and administrative powers*. In addition, the Theatre Commanders would serve for an additional two years, till 62 years of age, at par with the Service Chiefs. *This is the first time that a formal delegation of authority has been made to the CDS and theatre commanders to institutionally reconcile inter-service perceptional differences and ensure integration.*

Under this delegated authority, actions given in the succeeding paragraphs will be executed.

Action Plan

In Phase 1, to be completed by 2028, the emphasis will be on addressing the following aspects at the apex level—by the CDS, COSC and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA); and at the theatre level, under my directions:

(a) Formulating strategic guidance and promulgating a common military strategy to achieve collectively identified national politico-military objectives. This will be executed under the aegis of the CDS and Service Chiefs, *even if the formal National Security Strategy is not promulgated.*

(b) Based on the experience of recent global and regional conflicts, and through extensive scenario-building exercises *identify the nature and pattern of future wars in the Indian subcontinent* (say, in the short term, 2026–2030 and in the medium term, 2030–2035), factoring the realities of terrain, disputed borders, emerging technologies, the capabilities of our neighbours in the continental and maritime domain.

(c) Each service to evolve detailed plans for the visualised single-front, two-front and multi-domain threat scenarios.

(d) The individual service plans are to be amalgamated to evolve integrated/lead service response options in each theatre and at the national level.

(e) *Extensive wargaming* of likely scenarios—from localised actions to an entire front, and from a single front to two fronts, continental and/or maritime domain, asymmetric cross-domain incidents.

(f) Detailed planning and gaming of the visualised escalation ladder, with responses shifting around domain verticals. The SFC will also

be incorporated for seamless integration of conventional and strategic response options.

(g) Particular emphasis will be placed on honing the execution pattern, including the conduct of theatre-based operations, the level of delegation of authority, the span of control, and the overall chain of military command and politico-military control.

(h) Based on the integrated operational plans evolved, formulation of an intra- and inter-service, prioritised capability development plan and a budget-supported and time-bound acquisition plan.

(j) Finalising the initial allocation of resources and *ab initio* deployment within the theatre command area of responsibility. Planning for deployment or contingency allocation of scarce national assets (air force, long-range vectors, strategic systems).

(k) Networking all the services and agencies for seamless communication and for creating appropriate technology-enabled, integrated, battlefield management and decision support systems.

(l) Planning pragmatic joint training doctrine and institutionalising an integrated training curriculum, with emphasis on speedily training maximum officers at senior ranks (one star and above).

(m) Detailed consideration of the management of the hinterland, including critical aspects of national mobilisation, and reassignment of the responsibilities for rear area security, hitherto in the ambit of static Area/ Sub Area HQs.

Following detailed consideration of the aspects mentioned above, I direct the following to be implemented over the next 12 months, in the Northern Theatre Command:

(a) Finalise integrated operational and contingency plans for the Northern Theatre. Irreconcilable differences will be escalated to the CDS/COSC.

(b) Synergise employment and inputs from all surveillance (ISR) assets (military and non-military) for an integrated intelligence and surveillance picture.

(c) Create a functional 'Defence Communication Network' for seamless inter-service communication, within the area of responsibility of Northern Theatre.

(d) Streamline control of all organisations/assets for Cyber and Space operations, as allotted to our theatre.

(e) Reconcile inter-service differences related to the use of aviation assets, bases, airspace, air defence assets, etc.

(f) Optimise the use/holdings of common weapon platforms/systems in the inventory of different services. Major rationalisation to be done with the approval of COSC.
(g) The amalgamation of administrative and logistic installations and repair and maintenance facilities (where possible).
(h) Cross attachments of officers and personnel, within the theatre, for greater inter-service exposure.

Immediate Reorganisation

The following organisational changes will be executed forthwith (to be completed in six months):

(a) All Attack Helicopter and Light Utility Helicopter (LUH) units of the Air Force and at least two units of medium-lift helicopters (MI-17), required for tactical airlift of troops and basic air maintenance tasks, will be placed under the command of the Army (*This aligns with the recommendations of an MoD-appointed Committee in 2012*). Resources identified for the search and rescue (SAR) missions will only be retained by the Air Force.
(b) Select units of Army Air Defence (AAD) will be placed under the operational command of appropriate Air Defence (AD) HQs of the Indian Air Force (IAF). There will also be seamless integration of the Army's 'Akash Teer' Air Defence Control and Reporting (ADC&R) System with the IAF's Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS). Assets for Air Defence of the Tactical Battle Area (TBA) will be retained by the Army. The IAF AD commander will ensure coordinated deployment of all early warning, AD and counter-UAS assets within the ITC.
(c) Deployment of all the MALE (Medium Altitude Long Endurance) and HALE (High Altitude Long Endurance) UAV assets will be coordinated. There will be a theatre-wide ISR grid linking all sensors and recipients across the three services.
(d) At the Armed Forces level, select training establishments will be amalgamated for centralised training in common areas, e.g., training of personnel on all light helicopters and for air defence.
(e) All logistic units/installations, provost and medical resources, within the theatre will be merged.
(f) Cross attachment and posting of officers and other ranks between the three services will be promoted.

This demonstrative integration will promote the culture of cross-service functioning.

Phase 2 and Beyond

The contours of Phase 2 restructuring and reorganisation will evolve progressively, from the experience of Phase 1 transformation.

Some significant aspects that need to be thought through during Phase 1 for subsequent implementation include:

(a) *Finalising the chain of command and control*. The Theatre commanders could either be placed under the command of the CDS, in his capacity as the permanent Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee, or placed under the Raksha Mantri (RM), with the CDS acting as an intermediary, quite like the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff transmitting orders between the Secretary of Defence and the Commanders of Combatant Commands in the US system. Both would entail certain organisational changes and strengthening of structures at the HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS).[11]

(b) *Streamlining the structures of single-service Command and higher formation HQs*. This may entail reducing a layer of command (either eliminating Corps or Command HQs).

(c) *Sub-allocation of dedicated resources to each theatre and earmarking some superimposed resources for strategic and inter-theatre employment*.

(d) *Working out the nuances of making the theatre commanders 'Strategic level' commanders, rather than adding yet another layer of operational command*. The organisational construct of PLA theatre commands and the US Unified Combatant Commands, from which parallels are being drawn for our own restructuring, suggests that the charter of the Theatre Commanders extends beyond the traditional 'military domain'. They have a 'politico-military' charter, either with internal or external dimensions. This aspect would need to be examined in detail during the implementation of Phase 1.

Conclusion

The raising of the first Integrated Theatre Command has been a long journey. In effect, however, this journey has just begun. In Phase 1, the focus will be on institutional integration among the services and on overcoming single-

service perceptions and mindsets. We will need to transition to an integrated war-fighting doctrine and tri-service culture.

For this transformation to succeed, I, as the Northern Theatre Commander, need the full support of existing Command HQs of the respective services, which are being retained for now. I remain fully conscious that, despite being formally 'Integrated', due consideration would need to be accorded to the core competency, domain specialisation, resources, culture and ethos of each service to achieve the defined politico-military objectives. I assure you of my commitment to this principle. The integrated plans, structures and procedures will be continuously war-gamed and refined. There still remain several grey areas on which clarity will emerge as we proceed further.

Concurrently, I wish to emphasise that I have been vested with the authority to enforce integration and theaterisation, and I remain committed to completing the implementation of Phase 1 by the end of 2028, for which I need your support.

Let us together make this most significant Indian military reform a success.

Jai Hind!

XXXXX
Sd/-

Notes

1. 'Management of Defence', Chapter 6, Report of the Group of Ministers on National Security, Para 6.5, pp. 97–98, available at https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf, accessed on 20 March 2026.
2. Ibid., Para 6.18.
3. Nitin Gokhale, 'Naresh Chandra Task Force's Report on National Security: An Appraisal', Vivekanand International Foundation (VIF), 16 July 2021, available at https://www.vifindia.org/print/1252, accessed on 18 March 2026.
4. Sushant Singh,'"Joint Operations Versus Integrated Commands: Understanding a New Way to Fight Wars', *The Indian Express*, 10 May 2017, available at https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/joint-operations-vs-integrated-command-understanding-a-new-way-to-fight-wars-4648574/, accessed on 18 March 2026.
5. 'The Cabinet Approves the Creation of the Post of Chief of Defence Staff in the Rank of Four-star General', Cabinet, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 24 December 2019, available at https://pib.gov.in/PressReleseDetail.aspx?PRID=1597425, accessed on 18 March 2026.

6. Anil Ahuja and Arun Sahgal, 'A Process-led Approach Towards Integrated Military Commands', Policy Brief, Delhi Policy Group, - 24 July 2021, available at https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/a-process-led-approach-towards-integrated-military-commands-2773.pdf, accessed on 25 March 2026.
7. Anil Ahuja, 'On Road to Integrated Theatre Commands', Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF), 10 September 2024, available at https://www.vifindia.org/article/2024/september/10/On-Road-to-Integrated-Theatre-Commands, accessed on 26 March 2026.
8. Ibid.
9. The three services plus elements of specialised agencies and commands.
10. Anil Ahuja and Arun Sahgal, 'A Process-led Approach Towards Integrated Military Commands', n. 6.
11. Anil Ahuja, 'On Road to Integrated Theatre Commands', n. 7.