Jointness, Theatre Commands and the Future of Military Operations

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The debates surrounding jointness and theatre commands reflect broader tensions within India's military command structure that exist between legacy service-based command structures and operational requirements of modern warfare. As the nation transitioned into independence, India's military command-and-control systems were primarily developed with a geographic or service-centric focus. This model was sufficient for past generations' security challenges; however, current realities of multi-domain operations, the need for rapid decision-making and the possibility of simultaneous threats across various theatres have stretched these models to their limits. The post-Kargil reforms represented an important conceptual shift towards recognising weaknesses in inter-service coordination and integrated planning. They established the foundation upon which subsequent initiatives would be built to enhance India's joint operational effectiveness. The article posits that jointness has progressed from being an idealistic concept to a practical necessity due to the increasing overlap between the land, air, maritime, cyber and space domains. Additionally, establishing theatre commands is often viewed as a potential solution to the issue of jointness, but this represents a structural solution and does not guarantee the desired outcomes. Experiences from both the United States

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and China illustrate that structural reorganisation of a military organisation does not necessarily equate to enhanced jointness. In fact, it can create new types of friction among different organisations if not supported by a common doctrine, mutual institutional trust and well-defined command relationships. In addition to the complexities inherent in creating theatre commands in India, there are also several unresolved issues associated with civilian–military relations, including bureaucratic oversight, identity and professionalism issues, promotion structures and the central control of air assets as national resources. Each of these issues contributes to institutional ambivalence and resistance to the adoption of theaterisation as the preferred form of jointness. The article concludes that hasty or incomplete theaterisation could potentially disrupt operational capabilities and erode unit morale, while continued lack of progress may lead to long-term strategic stagnation. The research concludes that theatre commands should be implemented in a measured, sequential fashion that emphasises joint education and training, development of a common doctrine and refinement of existing integrated command processes. Theaterisation should be viewed as a continuous process requiring empirical data collection, war-gaming and sustained and active government oversight, rather than a singular structural reform. Ultimately, the success of India's military operations will rely less on the organisational chart of its command structure and more on the development of a true joint professional culture that can operate effectively and cooperatively in today's complex, multi-domain combat environments.

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Origins of the Concept of Theatre Command

India's military organisation, since independence, has developed a command-and-control structure that is primarily driven by geographic and service-specific needs,[1] rather than by a deliberate design to create an integrated joint operational capability. This organisational structure, though suitable for past national security challenges, does not provide a mechanism for joint planning or a unified operational command and control for all three services (Army, Navy and Air Force). As the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of India's strategic environment have increased, the limitations of the existing structure have become more apparent. The changes in warfare, increasing interdependence of operational domains and the possibility of simultaneous, geographically dispersed threats necessitate closer coordination among the

services. Although there is broad consensus on the desirability of jointness,[2] there is considerable disagreement on how to achieve integrated command and control. Therefore, the ongoing discussion regarding theatre commands represents a longstanding contradiction between the recognition of the need for joint operational capabilities and the continued influence of service-centric organisational traditions.

The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) marked a turning point in how India began to think about joint military operations.[3] Rather than treating the Kargil conflict as merely a tactical lapse, the committee located the problem within India's broader defence management system. It argued that the absence of institutionalised coordination between the armed forces and intelligence agencies had produced a fragmented understanding of threats and limited India's ability to respond coherently. While the committee did not explicitly advocate theatre commands, it stressed the need for integrated planning, shared intelligence assessments and stronger civil–military interaction. These recommendations gradually influenced subsequent reforms: most notably, the establishment of the Integrated Defence Staff; and later, creation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). In this sense, the KRC laid the conceptual groundwork for India's current pursuit of jointness and theatre command structures by highlighting that modern warfare demands coordination across services, rather than isolated, service-centric operations.

Domains Specific to Multi-Domain Warfare

The characteristic of warfare has changed from largely operationally autonomous, service domain-centric to that characterised by simultaneous conflict across multiple operational domains. Today, land, air, maritime, cyber, space and information domains are interconnected and often generate immediate operational effects upon action taken in another domain. While service-specific planning remains essential for the effective employment of domain expertise and capabilities, the growing interdependence of operational domains has increased the requirement for integrated planning and execution at the joint level. Conflicts reflect that military operations are no longer linear or sequential, but instead require the coordinated use of capabilities from the onset of conflict from all services.

Technological advancements (for instance, unmanned systems, precision-guided munitions and real-time intelligence) have further diminished the distinctions between traditional operational domains. Hence, the success of military operations will be determined by the ability to synchronise the

actions of different services rather than the singular performance of each domain. In this context, service domain-specific, hierarchical command-and-control structures have inherent limitations. Service domain expertise does continue to be essential, however, the conduct of modern warfare demands mechanisms to facilitate joint planning, resource allocation and operational execution at the operational level. This shift towards multi-domain warfare provides the basic reason to analyse integrated joint command structures, including theatre commands.

Time Compression of Decision-Making due to Technology

Technology has dramatically accelerated decision-making in modern warfare. Improvements in precision weapons systems, real-time intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, network-enabled command-and-control systems and information warfare have greatly reduced the amount of time available for the commanders to assess a situation and give an order. Delays in planning due to a lack of coordination, or in the process of approving plans, can have an immediate impact on military operations. Recent conflicts and professional military assessments (including discussions at Ran Samwad) have suggested that future conflicts will neither be short nor predictable; and most likely, they will require sustained coordination, joint logistics and rapid service-wide adaptations over extended periods of time.[4]

Relying solely on ad hoc coordination or sequential service-to-service consultations may prevent a timely response. Further, technological advancements in warfare place additional demands on planners to anticipate events and execute operations rapidly and seamlessly. In this regard, decisions will increasingly need to be made at both strategic and operational levels based on a common understanding of the situation and objectives. This reality underscores the need for organisations that can rapidly absorb and disseminate information, dynamically allocate resources and direct joint operations without unnecessary delay or friction.

Jointness as an Operational Necessity

The necessity for jointness has developed as a result of the need for rapid decision-making in multi-domain conflicts. Service coordination is no longer an adequate means of meeting the demands of high-intensity multi-theatre conflict. Hence, successful operations will require a mutually planned and executed approach that is fully integrated at both the command and execution levels. Since each service now relies increasingly upon other services to accomplish its mission, the actions of one service can have significant impact

on the success or failure of another. The absence of formally established joint structures to support this interdependence increases the possibility of friction rather than synergy. In addition, fractured command structures can lead to inefficient use of resources and delay in execution, thereby reducing focus on the operation during the most critical and decisive phases of a conflict.

The definition of jointness, thus, would be the capability to develop plans and implement projects across services within a common operational framework; establish priorities; and execute operations across service boundaries. This viewpoint does not diminish the value of the expertise of each service; it reflects the integration of that expertise to attain common objectives. The operational imperative for jointness provides the theoretical basis for examining structural solutions (for example, theatre commands) and recognising that structural changes alone are inadequate without shared doctrine, trust and professional commitment.

The Two-Front and Multi-Theatre Challenges

India's current strategic environment is increasingly shaped by the possibility of a two-front conflict with China and Pakistan.[5] Although previous security issues could be addressed in relative isolation, recent threat assessments suggest that there is a strong likelihood that both adversaries could apply pressure simultaneously, either cooperatively or independently, in multiple geographic and operational theatres.[6] This creates significant challenges to strategic planning and requires a level of coordination that exceeds what can be provided by service-based arrangements.

The two-front problem extends beyond land borders to include maritime space, airspace and evolving domains, such as cyber and information warfare. In such a case, the simultaneous management of multiple contingencies requires dynamic assignment of forces, prioritisation of threats and synchronised decision-making among services. Moreover, the scarcity of high-value assets—such as air power, intelligence systems and logistics infrastructure—compounds the need for an integrated planning effort.

Thus, it was in this strategic environment that the appointment of India's first CDS in 2019 gained significance. Under the leadership of late General (Gen) Bipin Rawat, the concept of Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs) was developed to address the requirements of a multi-theatre, two-front operational environment. Theaterisation was envisioned as a means of facilitating unified planning and coordinated use of forces among the three services and not merely as an organisational reform.[7]

Extension of Marine and Non-Regional Responsibilities

India's strategic responsibilities have grown exponentially beyond its immediate terrestrial borders, particularly in the maritime domain. The increasing importance of the Indian Ocean Region, the protection of sea lanes of communication and the security of island territories have created new operational demands that necessitate close coordination between naval, air and land forces.[8] An example of this coordination is the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), which serves as a limited type of integrated command. Commanded by a three-star officer on a rotational basis from the Army, Navy or Air Force, the command combines naval, army and air force units to protect a strategically important area. This is evidence of the recognition that maritime security cannot be accomplished solely through single-service organisations in geographically disparate and operationally complex environments.

The extension of India's non-regional responsibilities further underscores the operational rationale for developing joint organisations capable of dealing with multi-dimensional threats. Although existing arrangements demonstrate the feasibility of integrating services in some areas, they also illustrate the lack of an overarching framework for coordinating such efforts in other strategic areas.

Comparative Analysis of Theatre-Level Commands

The United States: Evolution of Theatre-Level Commands

In the post-World War II era, the US government undertook the first major effort to codify the lessons of the war and establish an organisational structure for national security for the newly emerging Cold War. The National Security Act of 1947[9] created the Department of Defense; consolidated the previously independent military departments under a civilian Secretary of Defense; and created organisations for coordination and direction, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Security Council.[10] Although the National Security Act of 1947 did not formally create theatre-level commands, it provided the legislative and organisational foundation necessary for the creation of theatre-level commands. The Act also formally recognised the need for centralised planning and civilian oversight, and thus laid the groundwork for the establishment of theatre commands to cover large geographic areas.

Following the passage of the National Security Act of 1947, the US Department of Defense initiated the Unified Command Plan, which

directed the assignment of geographically defined areas of responsibility to commanders of multi-service forces. However, during this initial Cold War period, the service chiefs still had significant influence over operational decisions, and unified commanders frequently had little or no authority to direct forces assigned to them. Thus, while the concept of theatre-level command was included in law and policy, the implementation of the concept remained limited due to institutional opposition and ambiguity regarding the chain of command.

Operational Evolution of the US Theatre Commands

The US Central Command (CENTCOM)[11] represents one of the most operationally significant examples of modern theatre command system. Established in 1983, CENTCOM emerged in response to expanding US strategic interests in the Middle East and South Asia regions, characterised by persistent instability, energy security concerns and geopolitical competition. Headquartered in Tampa, Florida, CENTCOM's mandate was to exercise operational control over forces drawn from all US military services, as well as work extensively with coalition partners and regional allies. Its effectiveness was most clearly demonstrated during the 1991 Gulf War, where unified theatre-level command enabled the rapid integration of air, land and maritime power in a highly coordinated campaign. Later, in 2001, CENTCOM became the primary command for prolonged military operations in Afghanistan. In 2003, in Iraq, it managed complex joint operations across vast political and geographic environments.

The evolution of the US theatre command system continued in the post-Cold War period with the establishment of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in 2007.[12] This Command reflected the growing strategic importance of Africa and illustrated the adaptability of the theatre command concept to emerging regional priorities. Unlike traditional combatant commands, AFRICOM placed greater emphasis on security cooperation, capacity building and inter-agency coordination, alongside conventional military operations.

The CENTCOM experience demonstrates that effective theatre commands require not only geographic responsibility but also clearly defined operational authority, integrated planning structures and sustained political support. At the same time, its operational history reveals inherent limitations as long-term campaigns exposed challenges related to inter-agency coordination, coalition management and the balance between military objectives and political constraints. Together, CENTCOM and AFRICOM

demonstrate that theatre commands are not static geographic constructs but evolving institutional mechanisms shaped by strategic necessity, political objectives and the changing character of warfare.

China: Centralised Control and Integrated Operations

Previously,[13] the People's Liberation Army (PLA) operated using a Military Region (MR) system, which integrated administrative, geographical and some operational responsibilities into region-based commands. The PLA's historical focus on internal security, territorial defence and mass mobilisation resulted in a structure that served the PLA well before 2016; however, the MR system ultimately failed to meet the needs of modern warfare. The system was primarily service-based and focused on land forces, with minimal institutional mechanisms for conducting joint operations among the army, navy, air force and the missile forces. The naval and air units were primarily subordinate to their respective Service Headquarters (SHQs), resulting in fragmented command and control during complex operational scenarios.

As China's strategic interests evolved beyond continental defence to include maritime security, aerospace control and precision strike capabilities, the structural deficiencies of the MR system became more apparent. The transition to a theatre command system was influenced by both operational and political considerations.[14] Chinese military leaders understood that future conflicts[15] would require rapid coordination across services and domains, utilising systems-of-systems warfare and informationised operations. Simultaneously, the reforms were also politically motivated to enhance the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) control over the armed forces through the centralisation of authority under the Central Military Commission.

On 1 February 2016, China officially eliminated the MRs and established five joint theatre commands:[16] Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern and Central. Each theatre command is designed to be a joint operational headquarters, with the responsibility for planning and executing operations in a defined geographic area. The respective SHQs retain responsibility for training, equipping and sustaining forces, while the theatre commander has operational control during contingencies. The strategic implications of the reform are evident in the Southern Theatre Command with the appointment of a naval officer as commander, marking a shift away from the historical dominance of the army and the increasing importance of maritime operations for China. While the theatre command system[17] has enhanced joint coordination and clarified command responsibilities, it remains a developing construct as it is impacted by the entrenched service culture, the long history

of centralising decision-making and the continued requirement for the CCP to maintain control over the armed forces.

Applicability to the Indian Context

All comparative arguments derived from the case studies of the US and China have to be carefully contextualised. In case of the US, the establishment of theatre commands was carried out under the Unified Command Plan (1946–1947), many years before the Goldwater–Nichols Act. Moreover, the Goldwater–Nichols Act[18] was an attempt to rectify the continuing problems with jointness even after theatre commands had been created. As such, it demonstrated that the creation of theatre commands does not automatically lead to jointness.

Furthermore, historical operational failures[19] provide evidence to support the idea that structural reforms alone, without corresponding doctrinal and institutional realignment, are not enough to produce effective jointness. There is also no empirical support for the claim that the physical co-location of SHQs is necessary for the achievement of jointness. Although component commands under geographic combatant commands may be dispersed throughout the world, and even on different continents, they remain capable of functioning as part of a unified operational framework.

Likewise, caution should be used when making claims about Chinese reforms because while China has created theatre commands, the main reason for this was to address domestic political issues, that is, dilute the concentration of power in the army and ensure greater party control over the military. Therefore, these reforms are tied to China's unique civil–military and party–army relationships and cannot be applied directly to the Indian context.

In a broad sense, the Indian debate over theatre commands is concerned with the need for evidence-based analysis, rather than inherited assumptions or selective interpretations of foreign experience. Any structural reform would have to be based on an understanding of India's strategic environment. This will also have to be supported by research into its institutions and tested by war games, as well as shielded from post-truth arguments that can shape policy decisions.

Unified Operational Command and Accountability

The major strategic justification for theatre commands is the principle of unified operational command.[20] Theatre commands are designed to place

forces from the three services—army, navy and air force—under the operational control of a single operational commander in a given geographic or functional area. While clear lines of responsibility for planning and execution already exist within the individual services, theatre commands seek to enhance inter-service synergy by integrating these structures within a unified operational command framework. Within a theatre command structure, the theatre commander is accountable for all operations conducted within his/her designated area, regardless of service affiliation.

The consolidation of authority is intended to create a more coherent process for making decisions and to eliminate delays associated with coordinating efforts among services at higher echelons. Additionally, a unified operational command structure increases accountability. When a single commander is responsible for a specific operation, the focus of planning effort is enhanced and the transparency of allocation of resources is increased. Conversely, service-centric structures may create overlapping responsibilities that make it difficult to assign accountability, and also complicate assessments of the operational effectiveness of a particular military operation.

Speed, Coherence and Deterrence Signalling

Military theatres are expected to significantly enhance the speed and coordination with which militaries respond to crises. One of the key objectives of theaterisation is to create operational headquarters where both planning and execution are integrated under one roof; this reduces the number of levels of organisation through which decision-making authority must flow. Theaterisation, thus, enables a faster transition from articulation of strategic intent to operational response in a fast-moving crisis. It also increases the ability to convey deterrent messages credibly due to its increased organisational cohesion.

Further, greater clarity in command-and-control arrangements enhances the military's ability to coordinate and apply military power across multiple domains, thereby strengthening the credibility of its deterrent posture. In contrast, fragmented command-and-control arrangements may send mixed or delayed signals to adversaries, undermining deterrence during periods of heightened tension. By integrating land, air and maritime forces under a unified command structure, theatre commands can enhance inter-service synergy and enable the synchronised application of military power from the onset of a crisis. Such synergy facilitates the optimal and efficient utilisation of resources at both strategic and operational levels, while reducing the likelihood of duplication of effort and conflicting actions.

Jointness is the key element for successful theaterisation. However, jointness will be difficult to establish if there are no similar views across the services of what jointness looks like in terms of command relationships, operational control and the role of each service. Recently, the CDS took a different approach, emphasising the need to develop unity of thought, common doctrine and institutional buy-in prior to structurally integrating the services.[21] The discussion at Ran Samwad also supported this view and indicated that even though there has been progress towards jointness, any structural reform before developing those capabilities may cause a decrease in flexibility and create resistance, especially in areas of limited and valuable resources.

Redistribution of Authority and Professional Identity

Another indicator of the Indian military's tendency towards organisational efficiency over structural operational reform is a report issued by the Shekatkar Committee in December 2016.[22] The committee, led by Lieutenant General D.B. Shekatkar (Retd), was established by the Ministry of Defence and produced 99 recommendations for enhancing combat capability and adjusting defence expenditures. Most of these recommendations addressed how to increase the internal efficiency of the services (for instance, reducing the number of signal units and improving the efficiency of repair, ordnance and logistics). None of the recommendations addressed changing the way the services operate together at the tactical/operational level, and therefore reinforced the trend of reforming the military without integrating the services.

It is the appointment of the CDS in 2019[23] that marked a major change in the Indian military's command structure. The role of the CDS is to provide the government with a single source of integrated military advice, as well as assist in the development of joint planning among the three services. The CDS is also responsible for leading the effort to establish theatre commands, an idea that has been discussed for years but remains unimplemented.

Under the proposed structure, theatre commanders will exercise operational control over forces assigned to their theatres, while the service-specific commands will continue to retain responsibility for raising, training and sustaining their respective forces. The creation of theatre commands, thus, will require a significant shift in operational authority and decision making from service-centric structures to integrated joint commands. Consequently, the development of theatre commands challenges longstanding professional identities and command traditions of the services, which have historically

operated independently, at times resulting in inter-service friction, misunderstandings and sub-optimal employment of critical resources.

Ambiguity in Roles and End-State Design

One of the largest obstacles to implementing theatre commands is the lack of clarity regarding its end-state and operational design. This became apparent in June 202124 when the three service chiefs and senior defence officials met the CDS and the Defence Minister to discuss the implementation of the proposed theatre command structure. In addition to the fact that no inter-ministerial consultations had occurred with the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the meeting exposed the lack of consensus regarding the basic structure of theatre commands. A central issue of contention was whether theatre commands should be organised based upon geographic boundaries or threat-based constructs. The disagreement regarding the proper structure of theatre commands reflected fundamental differences in opinion regarding the purpose and nature of theatre commands. As a result, the CDS was instructed to go back to the drawing board, thus indicating that the reform lacked institutional support at the foundational level.

Civil–Military and Bureaucratic Concerns

The Theatre Command proposal also encountered resistance within the civilian–military decision-making framework. Several senior bureaucrats expressed concerns regarding the procedural, administrative and financial implications of the proposed reforms. These concerns were exacerbated by limited consultations with key civilian stakeholders prior to the submission of the proposal. The inclusion of certain organisations, such as the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police[25] (ITBP), both of which fall under the MHA, further complicated matters by raising issues concerning jurisdiction and administrative control. The institutional friction created by these bureaucratic concerns was compounded by the lack of a unified vision among the services.[26] Ultimately, all this made it difficult for the civilian leadership to support the implementation of any reform plan.

Following Gen Bipin Rawat's death, Gen Anil Chauhan took on the role of India's CDS. Gen Chauhan's approach towards theaterisation was more cautious and based on achieving consensus. In particular, he stated that without a unifying view among the organisations involved in the process of theaterisation, there can be no improvement in the operational effectiveness of each service. Moreover, Gen Chauhan suggested that real

reform cannot take place until there is an institutionalised approval of the proposed changes.

Promotion Pyramids and Senior Rank Rationalisation

One of the less discussed implications of theaterisation, beyond its operational dimensions, is its impact on existing promotion pyramids and the appointment process for senior commanders. The creation of theatre commands is likely to reduce the number of high-profile operational command appointments available to senior officers. Since career progression and professional standing within the military have traditionally been closely linked to command experience, the restructuring of operational command arrangements may generate apprehension among senior officers. Theaterisation will alter the longstanding promotion pyramid by concentrating greater operational responsibility in a smaller number of command appointments, thereby limiting traditional career advancement opportunities and reshaping established career pathways.

Such concerns, however, should not be viewed as a justification for delaying or obstructing reforms that are driven by operational necessity and national security requirements. The primary objective of theaterisation is to enhance jointness, operational effectiveness and warfighting capability, rather than preserve existing career structures. Nevertheless, the concerns associated with rank rationalisation and career progression remain legitimate institutional issues that require careful consideration. Accordingly, the three services should undertake a comprehensive review of the implications of theaterisation for promotion policies, senior appointments and career management systems. Then, they should submit recommendations to the government regarding appropriate mechanisms for rank rationalisation and career progression within the theatre command framework. Establishing a transparent and predictable system for career advancement would help reduce institutional resistance, while ensuring that personnel policies remain aligned with the operational objectives of theaterisation.

Value of Joint Assignments

The success of theatre commands will be heavily dependent upon how joint assignments are valued and rewarded throughout the military career path. As currently structured, service-specific command positions retain significantly greater professional prestige and influence over promotion decisions than joint or integrated appointments. Consequently, officers may be discouraged

from pursuing joint assignments, which are often perceived as career-neutral or, in some cases, detrimental to promotion prospects. Furthermore, the absence of institutional incentives for developing joint competencies has limited the systematic cultivation of tri-service expertise.

Unless joint assignments are formally recognised as integral components of military career progression, officers may continue to view them as peripheral rather than developmental roles. For theatre commands to gain acceptance and function effectively, greater weight must be accorded to service in integrated tri-service appointments when evaluating promotion and career progression. Unless military career management systems and evaluation frameworks adequately recognise and reward joint operational experience, theaterisation risks becoming merely an additional layer of organisational restructuring, rather than a catalyst for genuine professional and cultural transformation within the armed forces.

Morale, Motivation and Leadership Continuity

Uncertainty about the transition into a theaterised military has significant effects on the morale and ability of the military to have continuous leadership. The ambiguity and protracted nature of the ongoing debate, combined with frequent changes in the direction of reforms, produces uncertainty among mid- and upper-level officers about their future as commanders and career advancement opportunities. Such uncertainty adversely impacts the motivational level of the officers and is exacerbated by officers working through transitional structures in the absence of clear institutional guidance. Furthermore, the numerous changes in the direction of reforms can also create uncertainty and disrupt the continuity of leadership at critical levels of command.

Theaterisation necessitates a continued commitment to and oversight of reforms; however, institutional hesitation and leadership turnover can negate the momentum of reforms. Without stable leadership and open communication, the confidence of the organisation in the reform process will begin to disintegrate, reinforcing resistance and scepticism to the reforms. Maintaining morale during times of structural change is as important as the structural change itself. Theatre commands cannot be successfully developed and implemented until the personnel involved in the transition perceive it as professionally credible, institutionally equitable and strategically justifiable.

Air Power Theatre Command Transcendence

Air power is uniquely positioned in the theatre command debate due to its inherent flexibility and theatre-transcendent characteristics.[27] Unlike land forces, which are geographically based and have limited mobility, air assets can be rapidly deployed over vast distances and employed simultaneously in various operational environments. This unique capability renders air power highly vulnerable to permanent geographic assignment to fixed theatre commands. Senior leaders within the Indian Air Force (IAF) have repeatedly asserted that air assets represent a national-level resource as opposed to a theatre-specific resource.[28]

Due to the limited number of high-value air platforms (for example, fighter squadrons, airborne surveillance systems and air-to-air refuelling systems), the division of these resources amongst multiple theatre commands is seen as operationally inefficient. Additionally, centralising the control of air assets enables the optimisation of the use of these scarce resources and preserves the strategic flexibility of air power. The Air Force,[29] thus, views the permanent subordination of air assets to geographically defined theatre commanders as a threat to the core strengths of air power—speed, reach and concentration of force. This concern represents the conceptual basis of the inter-service disagreement on theaterisation and represents one of the greatest barriers to integrating the services structurally.

Operational Control versus Professional Expertise

The main concern for the IAF with regard to theaterisation lies in the distinction between operational control and military professionalism. Once hostilities have begun, the Air Force leadership believes that all air operations should be controlled from one central authority in order to accomplish strategic objectives that cross geographical boundaries. In this view, the initial phases of a war would involve the IAF focusing its efforts on eliminating or severely impairing critical strategic targets, including enemy air bases, ammunition storage facilities, nuclear weapons installations, manufacturing plants, armoured formations, logistical areas behind the front lines and terrorist training camps. As such, these targets may be located across different geographical areas and would require coordinated action based on national priorities, rather than being treated as the exclusive responsibility of individual theatre commands.

In other words, the IAF believes that the distribution of operational control amongst several theatre commanders would compromise the

combat effectiveness of air power, add complexity to targeting priorities and reduce the ability to concentrate force at critical junctures. Although joint integration is not questioned in theory, the Air Force leadership maintains that professional expertise in air operations must remain centralised to ensure strategic coherence of air operations, especially during the most critical initial phases of a conflict.

Structuring of Theatre Commands and its Components

While the IAF rejects permanent fragmentation of the air assets, it does not reject joint operations or support to ground forces. After the first phase of strategic conflict, the IAF recognises that air power is an important means of supporting land operations, specifically by delivering close air support, destroying enemy armour, suppressing enemy positions and neutralising enemy forces before conducting ground attacks. Similarly, the Indian Army has its own aviation branch, the Army Aviation Corps, which has assets like helicopters, that is, Dhruv, Rudra, Cheetah and Chetak. This provides the Army with some capability for limited air operations, and also reduces dependence upon the IAF for certain missions.

Therefore, the issue is not whether air support is needed, but how air assets will be commanded in a theatre structure. During the recent Ran Samwad, held in Bengaluru on 9–10 April 2026, a consensus was reached among all three services on the theaterisation proposal.[30] While Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh[31] had previously raised concerns regarding the premature implementation of theatre commands, the revised proposal addressed the IAF's reservations by ensuring that strategic air assets, including Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), aerial refuellers and critical transport platforms, would remain under the Air Headquarters even after theaterisation.

Rapid Decision-Making Cycles and Crisis Response

The main operational advantage of creating theatre commands is that they will provide the ability to make timely decisions in a crisis. By streamlining command arrangements and reducing the number of decision-making layers between national commanders and field commanders, the theatre command headquarters can facilitate faster decision-making and execution. During high-intensity, time-sensitive conflicts, this is critical because it decreases the amount of time required to transition decisions into actions. When responding to crises in an organisation structured around individual services,

coordinating the response through multiple chain-of-command structures can lead to lengthy delays in information dissemination and execution of response actions.

The theatre commands seek to address these problems by developing joint planning and command at the operational level. Theatre commanders will have the capability to assess changing conditions in near-real time and allocate force resources with minimal inter-service coordination. Further, the theatre commands are designed to rapidly respond to multiple concurrent emergencies in different theatres. For example, in a two-front conflict environment, the ability to rapidly react to developing threats, as well as dynamically reallocate resources, becomes an important operational advantage. Theatre commands, thus, are seen as a way to improve responsiveness and decrease the friction present in decentralised command organisations.

Joint Planning and Execution

The ITCs have been proposed to enable joint planning and execution throughout the duration of military operations. Within a unified command, planners representing each of the three services will develop operational plans collaboratively. This will guarantee that the land, air and sea components of the operation are working towards shared goals and timelines. Thus, unlike sequential or parallel planning processes used individually by each service, joint planning prioritises developing operational tasks cooperatively thereby avoiding redundant efforts and incompatible taskings. This process ensures that the employment of forces across domains is synchronised during planning and execution, rather than being coordinated after the fact.

Joint execution will provide additional strength to the operational performance of theatre commands. Jointly employed assets, such as air operations in support of ground manoeuvre, naval operations in support of campaign-wide objectives and logistical operations across the services, will not only improve the cohesion of the operation but also minimise the opportunity for operational dissonance during complex and rapidly unfolding campaigns.

Resource Optimisation and Logistical Integration

The theatres will also be required to enhance resource optimisation and logistical integration amongst the armed forces. Through the consolidation of operational planning under a single theatre command structure, the duplication of resources and parallel support systems amongst services can be minimised. As a result, resources will be used more effectively, with no increase in expenditure on defence. Joint logistics planning will occur under

a joint theatre framework, providing the opportunity for coordination of supply chains, maintenance facilities and transportation assets across all services.

The coordination of logistics provides greater sustainability when conducting extended operations and also, lessens the burden on each service's individual logistical systems. In India, which has very few high-value platforms (such as aircraft, surveillance systems and specialised equipment), resource optimisation is particularly important. Theatre commands create a method of resource allocation that allows for prioritisation of resource use based upon operational need versus service ownership thereby increasing total combat effectiveness while remaining fiscally prudent.

Institutional and Professional Adaptation to Theatre Commands

Retaining Regimental Identity and Service Ethos

Historically, the Indian Armed Forces have developed strong regimental identities and service-specific cultures that provide the foundation for morale, discipline and pride in profession. One of the major cultural concerns with regard to theaterisation is the potential threat to regimental identity and service ethos. However, as theatre commands operate at the operational and strategic levels of the military—not the tactical or regimental levels—they do not interfere with the internal structures that provide the basis for sustaining regimental systems. Regimental identities, training traditions and service customs continue to exist in force generation and administrative domains.

Therefore, the issue is not losing regimental identity, but the need for service members to adjust their way of operating within a joint operational framework. Theaterisation does not destroy service ethos; it requires service members to operate beyond their normal institutional boundaries, while still providing the basis for their professionalism.

Joint Experience as a Means to Enhance Professionalism

Joint assignments and integrated operational exposure provide numerous opportunities to enhance professionalism. As service members work in joint structures, they gain an expanded perspective of how different services plan, operate and apply their various capabilities. Exposure to joint military organisations will provide an understanding of joint issues; additionally,

it will prepare future leaders to function in complex multidimensional environments. The exposure will also produce a common professional language and mutual respect among services. Through joint assignments, service members will gain knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of the various service domains, thus facilitating coordination and reducing inter-service conflicts during military operations.

In contrast to diminishing professionalism, joint experiences can develop the aspects of leadership that include adaptability, strategic thought and institutional maturity. This type of experience can contribute to the development of a true joint professional culture that enhances each service's unique domain of expertise. The successful implementation of theatre commands will be as dependent upon the manner in which the transition process is conducted as the structure of the theatre command itself. Without adequate communication of the transition process, reform efforts will likely be subject to interpretation by informal narrative and will be subject to speculation, resistance and institutional anxiety.

The lack of clarity about the structure and sequence of theatre commands has indeed generated concern among the services, veterans and analysts. There have been several competing interpretations, ranging from an air defence-centric model of theatre commands to geographically defined maritime theatres; and these competing interpretations create uncertainty regarding the purpose and implications of theaterisation. Communication is, therefore, essential to support institutional trust in this transition. Clear and transparent communication of the purpose of the reform effort, timelines and career implications of the transition process can help to reduce resistance and enhance confidence in the transition process. If effective communication does not occur during the transition, even the most well-intentioned reforms may fail due to misinterpretation and internal scepticism.

Implementation of Theatre Commands

Phase I: Joint Doctrine and Education Development

Any transition towards theatre commands will require the strengthening of joint education and doctrine as the first step.[32] The integration of the three branches into a single organisation cannot occur until there exists a common professional base that unites their operational thinking. Therefore, a 'habit of mind' of jointness must develop before it becomes an organisational reality. Phase I is, thus, focused on developing common doctrine, integrated

professional military education and continued exposure to joint planning processes.

Military officers need to be educated to operate outside of the framework of individual service-specific training and to approach operational problems using a joint operational perspective.[33] Without this mental and doctrinal agreement, theatre commands will become empty shells of organisational form devoid of true operational synergy. Experiences and debates currently occurring in India, and particularly the measured approach taken by the CDS, reinforce the belief that there must exist a commonality of thought prior to a commonality of command. Therefore, joint education and doctrine represent the foundational elements of any future organisational reform.

Phase II: Leverage Existing Joint Command Structures

The second phase of Indian roadmap for transitioning to theatre commands is to utilise the existing joint command organisations as practical learning platforms. Instead of establishing entirely new organisations, the focus is on enhancing the operational relevance of joint command organisations that already exist. An example of functional integration is the ANC. As mentioned earlier, the Command is headed by a three-star officer drawn from any of the three services, who exercises operational control over the army, navy and air force assets assigned to the Command, in order to safeguard India's strategic maritime interests in the Andaman Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The aforementioned operational command is an example of an integrated command in India and demonstrates that it is possible to exercise joint operational control while maintaining the respective service administrative organisations. Upon further review and development of current joint operational models, the military can establish best practices and identify organisational gaps and operational challenges associated with the execution of joint operational control. An incremental approach to achieving jointness will enable the military to develop its own organic forms of jointness, and therefore minimise the risks associated with a sudden, drastic structural reform.

Phase III: Gradual Implementation of Theatre Commands

The final phase of this proposed roadmap is the gradual implementation of theatre commands through the use of phased and selective application. The key distinction is that instead of implementing theatre-wide structures simultaneously, the theatre command structures are to be tested in terms

of their operational implications by limiting their scope and testing them in specific theatres or functional areas. Implementing theatre commands sequentially will provide the opportunity for commanders and their staff to gain knowledge and experience necessary to adapt to the new roles/relationships/command structure and coordination mechanisms, and therefore become operational-ready before the complete implementation of theatre commands. By implementing theatre commands in stages, the risk associated with the sudden introduction of a new organisational structure, especially in a security environment where there is a continuous requirement to remain operationally ready, can be mitigated. An evolutionary development process, as opposed to a rigid organisational model, will result from the sequential application of theaterisation reforms.

Political Leadership and Strategic Communication

Ultimately, the successful realisation of theaterisation will depend on sustained political leadership, effective strategic communication and robust civilian oversight. Structural changes to the military require both professional military consensus and clear political direction. If consistent political leadership is absent, reform initiatives will be subject to fragmentation of initiative and a lack of momentum. Political leadership will play a significant role in mediating inter-service disputes[34] and ensuring that institutional interests do not overshadow national strategic priorities.

The creation of the CDS was an acknowledgement that the civilian authority must directly influence the direction of military reforms and not simply approve/recommend it. In addition to the influence of political leadership on the implementation of theaterisation, strategic communications will be crucial to maintain public confidence and internal institutional trust. Clear articulation of objectives, timeline and reform principles will help to eliminate misinformation and speculation, allowing theaterisation to occur as a strategically owned national initiative and not as a contentious bureaucratic exercise.

Transitional Impediments and Command Disruption

The transition to theatre commands may produce several short-term challenges to organisational efficiency and command cohesion. During the shift from existing service-centric structures to an integrated joint framework, multiple layers of command and coordination are likely to co-exist. Such overlapping arrangements may complicate decision-making processes and

potentially slow operational responses, particularly during rapidly evolving crises.

Maintaining operational readiness throughout the transition process is, therefore, critical. Theaterisation cannot be implemented overnight, as India must retain the capacity to respond effectively to immediate and emerging security challenges. The temporary co-existence of service-centric and theatre-centric structures may create ambiguity regarding authority, responsibility and reporting relationships, making transitional disruptions both an organisational and operational concern. Furthermore, in the absence of well-established mechanisms for inter-theatre coordination and asset reallocation, emerging theatre commands may initially lack the flexibility and responsiveness that theaterisation is intended to achieve.

To mitigate these challenges, the implementation of theatre commands should be undertaken in a phased manner. Rather than pursuing simultaneous restructuring across all operational domains, India could initially establish a Maritime Theatre Command as a pilot project, before extending theaterisation to other operational areas. Given the relatively integrated nature of maritime operations and the comparatively lower degree of inter-service disagreement regarding command responsibilities, a Maritime Theatre Command would provide a suitable testing ground for refining joint command-and-control arrangements. Lessons identified during its implementation could subsequently inform the establishment of additional theatre commands.

A phased approach would also enable the gradual refinement of command-and-control procedures, joint doctrines, training frameworks, inter-service coordination mechanisms and reporting structures, while minimising disruptions to operational readiness. Additionally, it would allow policymakers and military leadership to identify and address organisational and operational challenges before undertaking more complex restructuring efforts involving land-centric theatres. Such gradual implementation would reduce institutional resistance, facilitate organisational adaptation and ensure a smoother transition towards an integrated theatre command structure.

Risks of Inaction versus Risks of Reform

The argument over theatre commands is fundamentally about balancing the risks of institutional inertia and the risks of structural reform.[35] Maintaining the current service-centric command structure provides short-term stability, but may lead to strategic stagnation in an evolving security environment. The failure to adapt the organisational framework to meet the changing security environment may render the armed services unprepared for future conflicts

characterised by speed, complexity and multi-domain operations. On the other hand, reform carries risks. Theaterisation implemented prematurely or poorly may create confusion, disrupt established command relationships and decrease operational effectiveness at critical times. The lack of institutional agreement, doctrinal clarity and tested operational models increases these risks.

The primary issue is not whether to choose between reform and stability, but how to manage the reform process to minimise disruptions while addressing long-term strategic vulnerabilities. Hence, theaterisation must be treated as a managed and adaptive process as opposed to a binary institutional transformation. To address the complexities of current warfare and the institutional barriers to theaterisation, organisational change should be viewed as an adaptive and iterative process. As no one-size-fits-all command structure can be assumed to be optimum in a highly dynamic strategic environment, it is imperative to develop an ongoing cycle of learning, experimentation and improvement in the design of organisations.

Adaptive learning requires institutional reviews, systematic war-gaming and feedback mechanisms to test new operational concepts against real-world scenarios.[36] These types of processes will allow planners to identify shortfalls in their organisational designs, improve the clarity of relationships within a command structure and make changes to their organisational designs while minimising the commitment to permanent structural changes. Further, by using iterative design, theatre commands will evolve based upon experience rather than some abstract model. The use of iterative design will help prevent the development of rigid institutional constructs, which may limit the ability for reform to continue to reflect the nature of operational realities, technological advancements and strategic priorities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the discussion of theatre commands in India is part of a broader process of strategic adaptation to the changing nature of warfare and the ever-changing security environment of India. Theaterisation is not an end goal, but rather a method to ensure that the organisational structure of the military is aligned with the needs of multi-domain operations, faster decision-making and the possibility of simultaneous threats. Although there is widespread agreement that jointness is a force multiplier that has the potential to increase the operational cohesiveness and deterrent capability of a nation's military, the absence of a common doctrine, institutional trust and understanding of

how relationships within a command structure are established creates the risk that friction could arise from the inability to create an effective integrated structure. Therefore, India's challenge is not whether to pursue reforms, but rather how to pursue these reforms in a managed, evidence-based manner through incremental implementation, continued learning and active political oversight, and avoid both premature restructuring and strategic drift.

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