Redefining 'Centralised Command–Distributed Control–Decentralised Execution'

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The Indian Air Force's latest doctrine adopts 'Joint Planning, Centralised Command, Distributed Control, Decentralised Execution' (CC–DC–DE) as the guiding principle for air operations. Indian Air Force (IAF) is the only organisation to have adopted the entire CC–DC–DE framework verbatim from the United States Air Force (USAF) doctrine. However, IAF's doctrinal treatment remains declaratory. This article analyses doctrines across the IAF, USAF, NATO, the UK, France, Australia and China to argue that doctrinal adoption without local contextualisation has rendered the CC–DC–DE framework operationally inadequate for the IAF. In turn, it forecloses its potential to guide C2 for joint warfighting.

The article analyses India's own strategic tradition. It draws on the Arthashastra, the Mahabharata, and Shivaji's Maratha campaigns to trace the logic of 'CC–DC–DE'. The article reconceptualises the framework to align Centralised Command as Strategic Coherence, Distributed Control as Operational Coordination, and Decentralised Execution as Tactical Convergence. The argument is simple—India does not need to import a command logic for its joint force. India needs to recognise and articulate the one it already has.

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Introduction

We are at an important juncture in the development of India's defence architecture. Theaterisation has been treated as the panacea for all integration and jointness issues. Operation Sindoor demonstrated the operational promise of an integrated air defence architecture. Against this backdrop, one question remains unanswered: What Command and Control (C2) logic will govern the operations of this joint force?

This article argues that the answer already exists but has not been articulated in a form that serves the purpose. The Indian Air Force's (IAF) doctrine establishes 'Centralised Command–Distributed Control–Decentralised Execution (CC–DC–DE)' as the key to air operations. India is the only nation other than the United States to have adopted the three-part formulation. Yet, the doctrine does not offer any explanation to these terms, does not map them to institutional structures, and has no connection to India's own strategic culture or inter-service realities. The formulation is present but its meaning is absent.

It may be argued that the IAF's classified operational doctrine carries the theoretical elaboration of CC–DC–DE for practitioners, and that an unclassified, overarching document is not expected to provide conceptual premises. However, the issue is not documentation but scope. A command philosophy whose structural logic can possibly guide joint operations, cannot fulfil that potential while its doctrinal elaboration remains confined within a single service. This article argues that it must be reconceptualised and extended as a joint framework that is legible to all the three services, mapped to India's proposed theatre command structure, and capable of serving as the common C2 logic that can guide joint warfighting.

It is imperative to understand the importance of timing. Theatre commands are being designed right now, including staff structures, chains of command, etc. Once these structures are in place and operational practice is built around them, any revisions would be difficult and expensive. Doctrinal clarity needs to come before the first structure comes up, not after years of operational friction. We already have a reference point. HQ IDS that came into being with the mandate of coordination finds itself toothless to bring in substantial changes without an operational mandate. Theatre commands

built on the same ambiguity will replicate that experience, at greater scale, under operational conditions, with no margin to correct course. India needs a clearly defined command philosophy common to all services before structures are built. Without a clearly articulated C2 framework, theatres would practically bring multiple platforms together without a suitable employment philosophy. This article proposes a 3C model that reads Strategic Coherence (CC), Operational Coordination (DC), and Tactical Convergence (DE). Such a reconceptualisation attempts to situate this command philosophy in Indian strategic culture, making it applicable across all three services to provide the C2 architecture that theaterisation requires. It also resolves three prevalent confusions embedded in the current formulation. These confusions are that 'Centralised Command' means centralised *control;* 'Distributed Control' means distributed *authority*; and that 'Decentralised Execution' means *uncoordinated tactical action*.

Methodology

Cases have been selected based on three criteria, namely the doctrinal influence on the IAF's own adoption of the CC–DC–DE phrase, explicit use of the phrase to allow for technological and institutional comparison, and representation across the spectrum of command philosophy. Israel is excluded because official Israeli armed forces documents are not accessible. This is a limitation, given Israel's combat experience and decentralised culture. The absence of Asian nations such as Japan and South Korea is another limitation, as their doctrinal publications in English are scarce.

The primary sources that have been analysed are official doctrinal publications like IAF doctrine 2000–22, USAF AFDP-1 (2021), and AFDP 3-0.1 (2023); NATO's AJP-3.3; the UK's JDP 0-30; RAAF's AAP 1000-1; and analyses of PLA reforms following the 2015 reorganisation. Each document is analysed to identify what command principle it employs, its institutional context, and its position on the spectrum of centralisation to decentralisation. The article examines IAF doctrine not only for what it states but also for what it leaves unsaid, since its central argument rests precisely on that silence. The article further draws on insights of Herrera's (2022) reassessment of Auftragstaktik's genealogy that provides a comparative-historical foundation for the paper's indigenous rediscovery argument. The other documents analysed are the French RFS study of C2 decentralisation, Wirth's SWP Berlin (2025) analysis, Blasko's congressional testimony on

PLA command weaknesses, and Murray and Millett's Military Innovation framework.[1]

The article draws upon theoretical lenses to guide its arguments. Barry Posen's organisational theory of military doctrine is one such lens. He argues that militaries, as bureaucratic organisations, resist innovation that threatens autonomy and default to institutional entrenchment. His three causal mechanisms, namely information asymmetry, autonomy-seeking, and SOP entrenchment, explain doctrinal inertia. He points out that change requires civilian intervention or an internal maverick. Admittedly, Posen's dependent variable is the offensive or defensive character of doctrine, not C2 architecture. However, the article borrows his causal mechanisms and not his output variable. Van Creveld argues in *Command in War* (1985)[2] that command systems have to solve an insolvable problem: inaccurate information, constant friction, and an opaque battlefield. Over-centralisation amplifies uncertainty downward, while under-centralisation risks incoherence. These two lenses provide the theoretical basis for the article. Posen explains why the IAF doctrine took the form it did. Van Creveld provides the mechanism to assess how the framework aligns with uncertainty management across the spectrum of command hierarchy.

The article's analytical 3C framework is the lens through which existing doctrines are examined. This is inspired by Van Creveld's command hierarchy and Clausewitz's three-tiered conception of war's political, operational and tactical dimensions.[3] These three levels also correspond to the three institutional tiers at which India's joint force must operate as theaterisation matures. The 3C framework includes strategic intent at the national command authority level, operational coordination at the theatre command level, and tactical execution delegated to field commanders and their formations.

Genesis

The 3C model proposed in this article is not a new construction. India's military tradition arrived at its structural logic over 2,000 years before Moltke codified Auftragstaktik.

Arthashastra

The *Arthashastra* is a manual of statecraft and its command architecture was formulated for the type of system that existed during that period. The King holds what Kautilya calls *prabhushakti*, i.e., sovereign will, the unchallengeable strategic authority from which everything else flows.

Campaign objectives, alliance decisions, the appointment of the *Senapati*[4]—none of this is delegated. This is what we term as 'Strategic Coherence' today. Kautilya understood instinctively that the same could not be shared without destroying the coherence it is meant to provide.[5] Below the King, Chanakya described a layered hierarchy that institutionalised operational coordination. Kautilya set out a decimal hierarchy of *padikas*, *senapatis* and *nayaks,* with specialist superintendents managing specific arms like elephant riders and archers. They were all connected by a system of signals using trumpets, flags and symbols.[6] This was termed as *mantrishakti*, i.e., the coordinative power that translates sovereign intent without direct royal presence.[7] Further closer to the battle, *nayaks* (senior field commanders with *senapatis* under their command) led their respective divisions in combat under the Senapati's supervision.

Structural redundancy ensured continuity, as multiple commanders were able to assume command if the primary fell. This was termed as *utsahashakti*, the power of initiative that aligns with the strategic objective without requiring constant supervision. This constitutes what is termed as 'Tactical Convergence' in contemporary times. Two thousand years before AFDP 3-0.1, Kautilya had articulated this command architecture. This article proposes this architecture as India's joint C2 structure.

Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* operationalises a similar architecture through its battle formations (*Vyuhas*). The supreme commander selected each day's formation—thus making strategic intent structural.[8] The entire force oriented itself to the formation the commander conceived on the particular day. The *Maharathis* managed operational coordination. These senior warriors held defined positions within the formation and adapted dynamically as battle conditions changed.[9] Each *Maharathi* held a defined sector, adapting to enemy shifts through battlefield signals, thus forming an active control layer between intent and action. Tactical convergence resided with individual warriors (the *Rathas* and *Atirathas*) who exercised autonomous combat initiative within their assigned positions.

Marathas

The Maratha model is the most operationally instructive of the Indian examples. Shivaji confronted numerically superior enemies and could not meet them on symmetric terms. Shivaji's *Swarajya* intent drove this entire

enterprise. Every operation was driven by this centralised strategic coherence, expressed through the *Sar-i-Naubat (Senapati).* Operational coordination was exercised through the *sardar* system, in which regional commanders, i.e., *sardars* translated strategic direction into simultaneous operational activity across different geographies.[10] Shivaji's elimination of feudal intermediaries and his use of a cash-paid standing army meant the *sardars* functioned as trusted operational coordinators. Tactical convergence was the defining characteristic of the Mavale, the light infantry recruited from the Maval hill country that lay west of Pune, which formed the backbone of Shivaji's guerrilla force. The tactics of rapid strike, withdrawal, terrain exploitation, and regeneration that gave the Maratha force its decisive edge demanded autonomous initiative at the lowest levels. A Mavla commander did not wait for instructions on when to strike and relied on using his own judgement of terrain, timing and estimation of the enemy's vulnerability.

Prussian Parallel

The Western parallel to this Indian tradition emerged through the Prussian military system of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. His caution that 'no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force' encapsulates the fundamental uncertainty problem that Van Creveld later theorised and that the CC–DC–DE is now designed to address.[11] The 19th-century warfare had specific distinction from the era that had preceded it. Large armies, dispersed frontiers, and communication via telegraph and railway made it literally impossible to command physically. The solution lay, as both Moltke and Van Creveld later established, in utilising trained subordinates, who could understand the commander's intent well enough to act decisively within it, using their own situational awareness at the point of contact. A formal proclamation of this directive approach came into being as 'Instructions for Large Unit Commanders' (*Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer*) in 1869, which issued broad directives (*Weisungen*) that outlined the political direction and the desired end-state. This replaced lengthy prescriptive orders. This left the onus of initiative onto subordinates as long as they aligned with the political intent. This evolution led to mission-type tactics (*Auftragstaktik*).[12] The so-called 'Magna Carta of Independence' explicitly embedded this as an institutional mandate. Importantly, it did not diminish central authority but redefined the relationship between centralised intent and decentralised action.

Indigenous Rediscovery

The Prussian genealogy is contested. Herrera demonstrates that American practices of delegated authority and commander's intent did not draw inspiration from Moltke. He suggests that nations routinely rediscover decentralised command principles from their own traditions rather than importing them. This argument is central to this article. The USAF itself adapted the idea of 'CC–DE' to match its geopolitical position, intent, inherent military strength, and operating environment. The article thus argues that if the source itself treats the subject in this manner, India ought to model its concept as per its realities. The USAF AFDP 1-1 Mission Command (2023) defines each element in operationally precise terms. Centralised Command is the authority to decide, approve and direct military operations across theatre commands simultaneously. Distributed Control is the mechanism through which planning, coordination and assessment are delegated to dispersed locations. The functions are distributed, not the authority. Decentralised Execution is the empowerment of subordinate decision-making for flexibility and responsiveness, grounded in the principle that tactical employment is optimised by those closest to the fight. These definitions are precise within the context of USAF single-service operations. They do not address how CC–DC–DE governs relationships between services, between a theatre commander and component commanders, or between a national leadership and a joint force.

The Age of Air Power

Land forces are assigned sectors for engagement. Ground battle is organised for geographic ownership, defined boundaries and clear responsibility. Air power does not work this way. A single IAF squadron can be tasked for air superiority over Ladakh in the morning, a deep strike in the west by afternoon, and maritime patrol over the Arabian Sea the same evening. No theatre commander's area of responsibility contains all three missions. The moment air assets are fixed permanently to a geographic boundary, it loses this capability. Limited numbers make the allocation problem even more acute. India does not have enough combat aircraft to give every theatre commander the dedicated air support he wants. Someone has to decide where those assets go and therefore, the decision-maker must have visibility across all theatres simultaneously. That is Centralised Command.

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical case for centralised air power command has roots embedded in history, much before the formal proclamation of the CC–DC–DE framework. Giulio Douhet established the organising principle in 1921 that air power concentrated under centralised command achieves a decisive effect, while it achieves nothing if divided. In the United Kingdom, the Royal Air Force became an independent force in 1918. Air Marshal Hugh Trenchard had already institutionalised this C2 structure mirroring Douhet's principles.[13] Mitchell's arguments, though controversial at the time, laid the foundations for further doctrinal debates. In the inter-war period, theorists at the Air Corps Tactical School developed strategic bombing and air superiority theories that implicitly demanded centralised command.

The Second World War

The Second World War was the litmus test for theories of dispersed application of air power. The War Department Field Manual 3135 (Aviation in support of ground forces) guided US forces during the launch of Operation Torch. It enabled the allocation of air assets to corps and divisions.[14] This arrangement assigned XII Air Support Command assets across both the U.S. II Corps and French XIX Corps. This meant two separate commands with independent, uncoordinated tasking procedures. The consequences became starkly evident at the Battle of Kasserine Pass in February 1943.[15] Combat Command 'A' of the 1st Armoured Division was fragmented across a 30-mile front from Sbeitla to Kasserine. Artillery support was too far off and air support had yet to be established. Rommel's armoured forces, with concentrated Luftwaffe support, struck with rapid precision against the dispersed Allied forces. No coherent air response could be concentrated at the point of Rommel's breakthrough since air assets had been divided between two corps with independent tasking orders. Thus no coherent air response could be generated. It was the most significant Allied defeat of the North African campaign and its cause was structural.[16]

By contrast, the British demonstrated the advantages of centralised command in the Western Desert. Air Vice Marshal Arthur Coningham and General Bernard Montgomery established what became known as the Tedder-Coningham doctrine, built on three principles. These principles were: indivisibility of air power; control of air power under a singular commander at par with the army commander; and theatre-wide authority with the Air Commander.[17] Following approval at the Casablanca Conference, a unified

air command took shape on 18 February 1943. The North African Air Forces (NAAF) under Lt Gen Carl Spaatz and the Northwest African Tactical Air Force (NATAF) were placed under Coningham.[18] Coningham forbade independent 'air umbrellas' and prioritised air superiority, tasking air assets across the theatre. As a result, most Axis aircraft had been destroyed, as Allied forces flew over 2,000 sorties on 6 May, reflecting the success of the sustained air campaign.[19] This victory also depended on over-extended German supply lines, numerical superiority of the Allied forces, and improved American ground forces. However, the doctrinal transformation leading to centralised air command was the decisive variable that produced such a conclusive outcome. The lesson was immediately codified. FM 100-20 (July 1943) declared that 'land power and air power are coequal and interdependent forces' and that 'control of available air power must be exercised through an Air commander'.[20]

Cold War Developments

The USAF became an independent service in 1947, later than the Royal Air Force and its counterparts worldwide. Several factors led to the entrenchment of the 'CC-DE' principle in its doctrines. The emergence of nuclear weapons meant an apex authority was a must to control these weapons and their employment. USAF was operating under NATO that demanded close liaison and control by a single air commander. USAF stressed the strategic role of air power, which meant conducting deep strike missions into enemy territory. Such an approach required delegated authority as aircrew had to operate under denied environment. This was formalised as 'DE'.

Korea, Vietnam and the Yom Kippur War—each produced further evidence of the cost of fragmented air command. The most visible manifestation was the 1991 Gulf War. Lt Gen Charles A. Horner served as the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) who was responsible for all coalition air operations under the US Central Command. Air Tasking Orders were planned and issued centrally at the now-famous 'Black Hole' in Riyadh.[21] Horner sequenced the campaign through SEAD, counter-air, strategic targeting, and battlefield shaping in a coherence that fragmented command could not have produced.[22] Desert Storm reinforced the tenet of centralised command and decentralised execution, but also exposed tensions. The US Marine Corps resisted the position of 'Joint Air Force Commander', referring to it instead as 'Joint Air Coordinator'. Both the Marine Corps and

the US Navy continued tasking their organic air assets via parallel tasking procedures.[23] These tensions revealed implementation problems that required trust, continued negotiation and commitment.

These tensions resemble the debate around theaterisation in India today. The army and the navy view organic air power as an extension of the logic of combined arms operations. The view from the Air Force wing is that 'CC' is a strategic imperative. They argue that air power controlled by a terrain commander fixes it geographically and destroys its flexibility. Both sides have valid arguments based on doctrinal and operational facts. The 'DC' layer of the 3C model resolves this tension by linking centralised strategic intent to multiple operational scenarios across multi-service components without tying air power to a geographic location.

The examples from operations in Bosnia (1995) and Kosovo (1999) demonstrated that centralised air command was imperative for NATO operations. Target approval processes and national caveats made any other arrangement unworkable.[24] These operations also exposed the persistent gap: the intermediary layer between centralised command and tactical responsiveness had no formal doctrinal definition.[25] The USAF replaced the 'CC–DE' with 'CC–DC–DE' as the operating principle for air operations as part of their doctrine AFDP-1. Colonel Sandeep Mulgund, the architect of the 2021 formulation, expressed the inadequacy of earlier articulation in distinguishing 'command' from 'control'. The prior framing implied that control should be central and only tactical execution should be decentralised. This understanding is inefficient and ineffective in the increasingly contested, modern-day operational environment.[26]

Global Adoption

The article surveyed various doctrines to identify their convergences and differences. NATO's AJP-3.3 claims 'CC' under an air commander as foundational. The UK's Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30 emphasises that 'the UK's preferred method for air command and control is CC-DE' based on the UK's philosophy of mission command.[27] The RAAF's AAP 1000-1 again warns that departure from the single-air-commander principle leads to 'misapplication of Air power by non-airmen'.[28] France retains OPCOM at CEMA level and delegates OPCON to the JFACC across all three services, reflecting sovereign command authority in coalition environments.[29]

Table 1 shows how each nation has or has not adopted the 'CC–DC–DE' construct.

Table 1 confirms this article's argument. Doctrinal adoption must match each nation's threat and operational realities. Compact, expeditionary forces manage with binary CC–DE. Forces operating at India's scale and threat complexity require the full CC–DC–DE construct, including an explicitly articulated DC layer.

The most striking contrast is visible in the PLA's reforms and subsequent doctrinal adoption. On the face of it, the reorganisation into five theatre commands appears as 'DC'. However, the glaring presence of CMC representatives defeats the entire purpose. If centralised command and control was the intent, then the original structure would have sufficed. The present structure does not encourage 'DC' or 'DE'. Recent purges in the Chinese military hierarchy have highlighted this structural flaw.[30] Subordinate commanders are reluctant to exercise initiative without approval from the higher chain of command.[31] Several assessments support this analysis, as captured in slogans such as the 'Five Incapables'.[32] The MCIA analysis also suggests an incentive for referring the decisions upwards. The need for consensus among party members prevents any initiative down the chain. Wirth (2025) calls it 'de facto delegation of responsibility upward'.[33] When viewed through Posen's lens, the PLA case exemplifies doctrinal modernisation without the cultural transformation.

India's Adoption of the Concept

The Indian Air Force's latest doctrine has adopted the phrase in its entirety. It recognises 'joint planning, centralised command, distributed control and decentralised execution' as the guiding principle for air operations.[34] The doctrine situates the concept in India's contemporary environment, highlighting a two-front challenge, geographic depth, nuclear overhang, and the need for joint and multi-domain integration. Broadly, it can be understood that the CC corresponds to Air HQ's authority to lay down clear war objectives, rules of engagement, and conflict termination criteria at the strategic level while respective Command HQs are empowered to exercise DC through IACCS nodes. Simultaneously, DE authorises Air Battle managers, mission leaders, aircrew, Fighter controllers, SAGW operators, and those engaged in the combat.

Table 1 Comparative Doctrinal Adoption of CC–DC–DE across Selected Nations and Alliances

Nation/ Alliance	Threat Construct & Geography	Doctrinal Formulation	Degree of Centralisation	Intermediary Control Mechanism	Cultural Enablers
USAF	Global power projection; peer adversary (China/Russia); no geographic constraint; trans-oceanic reach defines operational design	CC–DC–DE (AFDP-1, 2021)	High (COMAFFOR/ JFACC)	Distributed Control via AOC, CAOC nodes; AFDP 3-0.1 Continuum	Five Cs (AFDP 1-1); Auftragstaktik tradition; trust, competence
NATO	European theatre; collective defence; geographic depth from Atlantic to Eastern Front; multi-national coalition	Centralised command under single air commander (AJP 3.3)	High (JFACC under JFC)	CAOC as joint coordination centre	Standardised STANAGs; coalition interoperability
United Kingdom	Expeditionary operations; limited domestic depth; global reach via carrier groups; coalition-dependent for large-scale ops	Centralised control, decentralised execution (JDP 0-30)	High (Air Component Commander)	UK CAOC/ASOC; mission command philosophy	120-year mission command heritage; FSR 1905 lineage
France	Expeditionary; Francophone Africa primary theatre; sovereign authority concern in coalition; OPCOM retention non-negotiable across all services	OPCOM retained by CEMA; OPCON delegated to JFACC	Very High (CEMA retains OPCOM)	JFACC as delegated OPCON authority	Napoleonic centralised tradition; deliberate subsidiarity

Australia (RAAF)	Indo-Pacific maritime environment; northern approaches; limited force size; US partnership as force multiplier	CC–DE (AAP 1000-1)	High (single air commander)	ASOC with dedicated planning staff	Professional mastery doctrine; compact force structure
PLA (China)	Multi-domain threat; Taiwan, South China Sea, India, US simultaneously; continental west and maritime east; internal security overlay	Theatre commands with CMC oversight	Extremely High (dual-chain CMC + theatre)	Distributed Control Mechanism with oversight by Party committee at each echelon	Loyalty-first culture; "Five Incapables"; limited subordinate initiative
India (IAF)	Two-front continental and maritime threat; Himalayan heights to Indian Ocean littoral; nuclear overhang; 17 commands; limited Air assets relative to geographic span	CC–DC–DE adopted verbatim (IAF Doctrine 2022)	Declared High; institutionally unclear	IACCS/Akashteer (partial); DC layer under development	Limited doctrinal elaboration; inter-service tensions over asset allocation

The doctrine does not emphasise what the 'CC–DC–DE' framework means. There is no definition to refer to or operational manifestations to amplify the mechanism. In this form, it does not help the concept to transform into an evolved one that promises to guide joint operations in the future.

There is no definition of each term precise enough to guide deliverables on organisational structures, no SOPs that translate the framework into joint procedures, and no explicit linkage to contemporary sister services' doctrines to engage them. It is appreciated that an Air Commander would understand the nuances due to his/her experience; however, it does not encourage sister services to engage on the topic. That is the flaw that this article targets. The article argues that the 'CC–DC–DE' framework, if properly articulated, can drive the upcoming joint structures if communicated properly. Army and naval commanders and staff officers must understand a concept that can guide future theatre operations. The Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACCS) is touted as the primary enabler for centralised command and distributed control. The IACCS and Akashteer joint network validated the CC–DC construct in practice during Operation Sindoor for air defence. However, the broader architecture for Multi-Domain Operations (MDOs) remains a work in progress.[35] The misunderstanding is most consequential across sister services. The Indian Army and Navy each practice initiative at the tactical level; 'DE' is not absent from their culture. The claim is narrower. Neither service's publicly available doctrine employs the CC–DC–DE formulation, and none defines the conditions under which all three services operate, highlighting C2.[36]

The said absence affects air power employment the most. IAF's assertions are derived out of long-held doctrinal precepts and operational experience that demonstrated how fragmented control undermined the flexibility afforded by air power and theatre-wide priorities. The argument for theaterisation invokes optimum and effective use of air power under the theatre commander. The expansion of likely Indian military engagement across continental and maritime borders makes a compelling case for the entire CC–DC–DE, including the DC layer, as imperative for the most efficient use of combat power.[37] This argument does not account for India's limited number of air assets[38] and the consequent loss of the ability to move assets dynamically to generate mass for effect. The present Indian structure is organised in 17 commands. This makes the full CC–DC–DE (with DC layer) operationally necessary, unlike the compact British/Australian model where CC–DE suffices. The genesis traced in this article confirms that these principles are not imports but a rediscovery of India's own strategic

heritage. The Army's approach to operational planning assigns geographic areas of responsibility to Theatre Commanders, within which all combat enablers, including air assets, are expected to support the Commander's plan. This geographic assignment model, reflected in the drive for Theatre Commanders to exercise operational control over air assets in their theatre, reflects a legitimate combined arms philosophy. The IAF's position is equally grounded in the historical and doctrinal evidence this article has traced, that the concentration of air power under centralised command and employment across theatre boundaries produces a decisive cumulative effect. Air power fixed to geographic theatres loses the dynamic flexibility that defines its operational character.

Analysis

Each element of the proposed 3C model, namely Strategic Coherence, Operational Coordination, and Tactical Convergence, has been examined for the possible institutional outcomes it can produce. Does it have a home, a mechanism, and people trained to run it? By Van Creveld's measure, effective command allocates uncertainty-management at every level of the hierarchy. India's current adoption does not perform well at any level.

Strategic Coherence—Centralised Command

In the Indian context, the Raksha Mantri's Operational Directive (RMOD) establishes strategic objectives, constraints and military authority. In turn, the services prepare their operational instructions that translate political intent into military planning guidance. They are instruments of strategic direction in the broad sense, but they are not designed to be the operational expression of 'CC'. The RMOD does provide wider political intent, but it cannot substitute for the joint planning that 'CC' requires. 'CC' requires conversion of political intent into military objectives that would guide operational sequencing and resource prioritisation. Ultimately, joint planning is the basis for 'CC–DC–DE' to become operational dictum. A Joint Forces Headquarters is a possible structure that can fulfil this task of joint planning. In this case, joint planning and 'CC' reside at the same place, with an operational mandate. [39] This is in contrast to the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS), which lacks the authority, mandate, or wherewithal to undertake any operations presently.[40] The operational translation of such strategic direction and joint contingency planning with pre-established tasking arrangements, has no institutional home.

Operational Coordination—Distributed Control

Distributed Control is the most visibly validated element of the 3C model in the Indian context and simultaneously the most visibly incomplete as a joint concept. Operation Sindoor demonstrated the IACCS-Akashteer network functioning as a distributed control architecture for air defence, with dynamic engagement authority pre-delegated to constituent nodes, and battle management conducted without centralised clearance for each engagement decision. This is Operational Coordination functioning precisely as Van Creveld's framework demands, by managing uncertainty at the operational level without amplifying it upward. The DC concept is therefore not theoretical in the Indian context; it is operational, and it works.[41] However, the Operation Sindoor validation applies to the air defence layer of a single functional domain. 'DC' in a joint operation would require integration of all three—IAF's IACCS, Navy's Trigun, and Army's Akashteer networks within theatres and across the span of all theatres. Once these networks talk to each other seamlessly, the next step would be to get all operation centres, space-based assets, cyber, EW, and information assets under a single roof. At present, all three services operate within service silos, with limited interoperability. The US still finds difficulties with interoperability after a decade of practising JADC2. India must build its own equivalent on the validated Operation Sindoor foundation, in phases that match institutional capacity, rather than importing a model that its originator itself has not been able to adopt successfully.

Tactical Convergence—Decentralised Execution

'DE' is the most misread part of the concept. It does not translate to aircrew deciding their own targets or initiating engagement without clearance. What it means rather is that the aircrew, the battle manager, and the controller closest to the battlespace are trained and empowered to accomplish the assigned task. The difference between a system that trusts this and one that does not is the difference between a four-second engagement window and a missed opportunity. Decentralised Execution without Strategic Coherence and Operational Coordination above it is tactical anarchy. Conversely, empowered with the latter, the joint force generates decision at a speed that no adversary's command cycle can match.

The A2/AD environments each adversary can generate mean that waiting for hierarchical clearance risks would result in missing the operational window entirely. At the moment of decision, the correct response cannot travel up a command hierarchy. Building this requires three things: authority

pre-delegated to the point where it counts, intent stated precisely enough to survive a communications blackout, and joint training deep enough that an Army officer and an IAF mission leader think in the same doctrinal language.[42]

It may be argued that the verbatim adoption is intentional. This allows interoperability within the world's leading air power. This may be agreed to informally but mere word alignment is not enough. Without context tied to India's objectives, geography, institutions and strategic culture, the approach remains declaratory rather than actionable. The comparative analysis shows that each nation adapts the 'CC–DC–DE' idea to match its strategy and institutions. Barry Posen's theory suggests that failing to ground imported doctrine in local reality leads to stagnation rather than innovation.[43]

Synthesis

The IAF is the only service other than the USAF to have adopted the entire construct verbatim. Yet in its adoption, the doctrine fails to contextualise or adequately explain these terms or link them to any possible deliverables. The US utilised knowledge gleaned over three decades of operational experience and successive structural reforms. However, India has adopted the phrase without any context to its realities. This gap between doctrinal articulation and its effective meaning for operations is the central argument of this article. Without a common C2 philosophy, theaterisation would foment dispute rather than integration. Procurement offices without a joint doctrinal standard will keep buying service-specific systems that cannot communicate with each other. Incoherent PME would produce officers excellent within their service but underconfident beyond it. Meanwhile, the argument over air assets will continue to generate heat without resolution, because the services are arguing from different doctrinal premises and neither is wrong on its own terms.

Recommendations

The article has identified five deliverables from the synthesis above. They are sequenced as doctrine before organisation, organisation before network, network before procedure, and procedure before the training that makes the whole architecture real.

Doctrinal Articulation

The structure begins with the establishment of the doctrine. Every other detail such as the Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ), the network, or the training pipeline depends on having a clear conceptual foundation. Without the doctrine, there exists the risk of building structures around an undefined idea. Two things need to happen in parallel. The IAF doctrine must clearly define this phrase and explain how to implement it in the Indian context. A dedicated annexure to the 2022 doctrine is needed to provide specific elaboration without complete revision. The concept must be grounded in India's philosophical lineage, as this article has attempted to do.

Beyond the IAF, the larger challenge is the establishment of a joint doctrine. This article does not propose that the Army and Navy adopt the IAF's CC–DC–DE formulation verbatim; that would replicate the adoption problem this article has diagnosed at the joint level. The proposal is that HQ IDS, with the IAF as the lead service (given its doctrinal ownership of the construct), initiate the development of a jointly-owned, joint doctrinal framework for C2 architecture, one that all the three services contribute to and own. The 3C model provides the preparatory framework for that joint conversation. The final destination is a joint doctrine that firmly establishes what and how 'CC', 'DC' and 'DE' translate to in a joint structure.

Organisational Architecture

This joint imperative must begin at the apex with joint planning at the non-kinetic level. A Joint Forces Headquarters (JFHQ) brings together elaborate joint planning with an operational mandate for theatre commanders to follow. This ensures all theatres, and in turn all combat elements, are aligned on objective and intent at the top.

The JFHQ as envisaged provides the 'CC' and joint planning functions. The theatre commanders exercise 'DC' under their respective theatres and tactical units carry out 'DE'.

In the absence of joint planning, theatres would cause fragmentation instead of integration. Theatre commanders would execute geographic control rather than joint distributed control. Doctrinal experimentation and inter-service consultation should determine precise configuration of this architecture. What must not be left to experimentation is the principle of Centralised Command, the element of the 3C model that requires an institutional home with operational authority at the national level. The JFHQ is that home for planning and would be delegated further to theatre commanders during the operational phase.

Network Integration

India needs a cross-domain, common network that enables real-time data transfer. The integration observed during Operation Sindoor provides a validated model for air defence. This must be extended to offensive air operations, naval task group coordination, land battle management and augmentation via non-kinetic means such as cyber and information operations. As the US JADC2 experience demonstrates, this integration cannot be achieved in one institutional step.[44] India must build on its own validated foundation, in phases.

Phase 1 extends the Operation Sindoor validation. The IACCS-Akashteer integration has proved the veracity of a joint air defence structure. Phase 1 extends this model to include offensive air tasking, dynamic re-tasking, and air-to-ground coordination, thus building the tri-service data link, that connects IACCS to the Army's battle management systems for the ground-air interface that joint operations require. Phase 2 expands the network to include Trigun to this architecture. Phase 3 extends this to other elements of warfighting like cyber, electronic warfare and space-based surveillance. Procurement policy must mandate network compatibility as a primary criterion alongside platform performance from Phase 1 onwards. Without this procurement discipline, each new system risks perpetuating the siloed architecture that currently limits Distributed Control to the air defence layer.

Procedural Framework

The 'CC–DC–DE' construct requires defined rules of engagement, pre-delegated authorities, and condition-based authority. The 'Distributed Control Continuum' in AFDP 3-0.1 is a fair model for evolving an Indian parallel to such a mechanism.[45] In the absence of such a mechanism, commanders are forced to refer their decisions upwards. The operational commanders positioned between strategic intent and battlefield action are the entity with the highest situational awareness of the enemy's likely courses of action, own objectives and force dispersion. They must be empowered to take decisions as they deem fit. Denying this latitude inverts the logic of mission command and widens Boyd's OODA loop. The adversary, cycling faster through Observe–Orient–Decide–Act, could seize the initiative.[46] The AFDP framework provides a useful analytical model. Still, its application must be mapped to India's specific scenarios, such as operations in denied environments, operations under EW suppression, time-sensitive targeting and the nuclear overhang.

Human Resource and Training

Every institutional deliverable ultimately depends on the human capacity to understand and execute the 3C model in practice. Future wars require a specific skill-set for individual operators. Hence training must incorporate these considerations. As the PLA's case demonstrates, any doctrinal input must be supported by requisite cultural backing, or it will remain declaratory rather than operational. This requires education and understanding of the 3C concept as an operational C2 concept rather than purely an IAF mechanism. This is achievable within existing institutional architecture at minimal additional cost.

The next step is specialisation of battle management as a dedicated joint discipline, not as an add-on to service-specific roles. A joint training programme, with IAF institutional experience at its core but all three services contributing to its design, would begin to build the C2 culture that the 3C model requires.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that verbatim adoption without indigenous contextualisation of doctrinal precepts has rarely been successful. Countries like the UK, France and Australia adopted the principles as per their own traditions. The PLA adopted the vocabulary without the requisite cultural transformation. This article proposed a 3C reconceptualisation of Strategic Coherence (CC), Operational Coordination (DC) and Tactical Convergence (DE), and further provides five deliverables: doctrine, structure, network, procedure and training.

The article discussed doctrinal concepts and their meaning for organisational structures. It does not foray into operational campaigns except for specific validation of a concept. The exclusion of Israel and Asian nations such as Japan and South Korea represents acknowledged gaps. Future research could build on the Operation Sindoor validation through systematic campaign analysis, assessing the extent to which the IACCS-Akashteer integration meets the criteria for full 'CC–DC–DE' implementation.

The implications are immediate. As the Indian theaterisation takes place, it cannot happen without doctrinal clarity. What C2 logic would guide forces within theatres and at the national level? Theaterisation without guiding logic is a structural risk. Operation Sindoor demonstrated what the 'DC' layer could achieve as an air defence concept. The task now is to extend that validated model, domain by domain, through structured joint

institutional action, into the full joint warfighting architecture that the 3C model describes. That model is not a utopian import. It is the framework India has always possessed and it may now be applied to the joint force India is building.

Notes

1. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (eds), *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 3–6.
2. Martin van Creveld, *Command in War,* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 3–7, 261–275.
3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*(edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976, pp. 88–99, 128–132.
4. A clarification of terminology is necessary here. Kautilya uses *Senapati* as a generic title across multiple levels of the command hierarchy, both for the Commander-in-Chief and for sub-commanders within the mid-tier, as Rangarajan's translation and commentary explicitly notes. In this section, *Senapati* (capitalised) refers to the Commander-in-Chief; lowercase *senapati* denotes mid-level commanders within the hierarchy.
5. Kautilya, *Arthashastra* (translated by R. Shamasastry), *Book VI, 'The Source of Sovereign States'*, Chapters I–II, and *Book X,* 'The Distinctive Array of Troops in Respect of Wings, Flanks, and Front', Chapter V, Government Press, Bangalore, 1915; L.N. Rangarajan (trans. and ed.), *Kautilya: The Arthashastra*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 572–580.
6. Kautilya, *Arthashastra* (translated by R. Shamasastry), *Book X*, 'The Array of the Army like a Staff, a Snake, a Circle, or in Detached Order', Chapter VI, Government Press, Bangalore, 1915. For superintendents (*adyakshas*) of elephants, cavalry, chariots and infantry, see Book II, Chapters XXIX–XXXIII.
7. It should be noted that Kautilya does not preclude the King from leading in battle. Book X explicitly addresses the King's battlefield role. For strategic reasons, Kautilya recommends that the King exercise command from a protected position in major campaigns, preserving the coherence of strategic direction rather than risking its loss to enemy action.
8. V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *War in Ancient India*, Macmillan, Madras, 1944, Chap. VII, Sec. vi ('Tactics'), pp. 264–274; P. C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Dacca, 1941, reprinted in Delhi, 2017, Chap. XII(b). See also Kaushik Roy, *Military Manpower, Armies and Warfare in South Asia,* Pickering & Chatto, London, 2013, for more recent scholarship on ancient Indian military organisation.
9. The interpretation that Vyuha formations "evolved dynamically to respond to battlefield developments" is a secondary scholarly inference drawn from narrative descriptions in the Bhishma Parva and Drona Parva, not a direct doctrinal

prescription found in the Mahabharata text itself. The epic describes daily changes in formation selection (e.g., the shift from Krauncha Vyuha on Day 2 to Makara Vyuha on Day 5), counter-formations deployed in response to the opponent's array, and the use of conch shells, drums and trumpet sounds to signal transitions during battle. For analysis, see Dikshitar, *The Art of War in Ancient India*, pp. 264–274 and Appendix III ("War Music"), pp. 377–380; P.C. Chakravarti, *The Art of War in Ancient India,* Chap. XII(b)–(c), n. 9. For the Vedic-period antecedents of coordinated army organisation, see Sarva Daman Singh, *Ancient Indian Warfare with Special Reference to the Vedic Period,* E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1965, especially the chapters on military organisation and battle conduct.

10. Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600–1818,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, especially the chapters on military organisation. See also Jadunath Sarkar, *Military History of India,* Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1960, for Shivaji's innovations in combining centralised strategic direction with decentralised guerrilla execution.
11. Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel J. Hughes, Presidio Press, Novato, 1993, p. 92.
12. It is worth noting that the term *Auftragstaktik* itself did not appear until the 1890s, and was initially used derisively by opponents—the *Normaltaktikers*—who preferred rigid standardised procedures. See Marco Sigg, *Der Unterführer als Feldherr im Taschenformat: Theorie und Praxis der Auftragstaktik im deutschen Heer 1869 bis 1945*, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014, pp. 4–5 (on the term's genesis and definitional ambiguity) and pp. 457–463 (on the applied tension between initiative and conformity). See also Sigg, '"Dezisionismus als Denkstil" Auftragstaktik im preußisch-deutschen Heer 1869 bis 1945', in Martin Clauss and Christoph Nübel (eds), *Militärisches Entscheiden: Voraussetzungen, Prozesse und Repräsentationen einer Sozialen Praxis von der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt/New York, Campus Verlag, 2020, pp. 192–198. For a rigorous challenge to the Prussian genealogy, see Ricardo A. Herrera, 'History, Mission Command, and the Auftragstaktik Infatuation', *Military Review*, Vol. 102, No. 4, July–August 2022. He demonstrates that American practices of delegated authority, commander's intent, and subordinate initiative long predated conscious borrowing from Moltke.
13. H.A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part Played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force*, Vol. 6, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1937, pp. 1–24; Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard: Man of Vision,* Collins, London, 1962, pp. 301–340; Daniel R. Mortensen (ed.), *Airpower and Ground Armies: Essays on the Evolution of Anglo-American Air Doctrine. 1940-1943*, Air University Press, available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/AUPress/Books/B_0050_MORTENSEN_AIRPOWER_GROUND_ARMIES.pdf, accessed on 23 February 2026.
14. *Field Manual 31-35: Aviation in Support of Ground Forces*, US War Department, US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1942, pp. 1–5.

15. Shawn P. Rife, 'Kasserine Pass and the Proper Application of Airpower', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 20, Autumn/Winter 1998–99, pp. 71–76.
16. Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, translated by Dino Ferrari (1942; reprinted, Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), pp. 28–36, 63–84. See also Phillip S. Meilinger, 'Giulio Douhet and the Origins of Airpower Theory', in Phillip S. Meilinger (ed.), *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, 1997, pp. 1–40.For the broader doctrinal pattern across national traditions, see the chapters by Meilinger on Trenchard (41–78), Clodfelter on Mitchell (79–114), and Faber on the Air Corps Tactical School (183–238).
17. John L. Frisbee. 'The Lessons of North Africa', *Air Force Magazine*, 1 September 1990,available at https://www.airforcemag.com/article/the-lessons-of-north-africa/, accessed on 17 March 2026.
18. Mortensen, *Airpower and Ground Armies*.
19. Ibid.
20. Silvano A. Wueschner, 'Field Manual 100–20: The "Declaration of Independence" for Tactical Airpower', Air University, 16 July 2018, available at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/News/Display/Article/1576040/field-manual-100-20-the-declaration-of-independence-for-tactical-airpower/, accessed on 17 March 2026.
21. John A. Tirpak, 'The Strategy of Desert Storm', *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 1 January 2006, available at https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/0106storm/, accessed on 23 February 2026.
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23. James A. Winnefeld and Dana J. Johnson, *Joint Air Operations: Pursuit of Unity in Command and Control, 1942–1991,* Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 1993, pp. 73–74, 101, 115.
24. Robert C. Owen (ed.), *Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning*, Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, 2000. For tactical adaptation within CAOC constraints during Operation Deliberate Force, see especially Lt Col Richard L. Sargent, 'Deliberate Force Tactics', Chap. 11 (297–350); Lt Col Mark J. Conversino, 'Executing Deliberate Force, 30 August–14 September 1995', Chap. 5 (131–68); and Lt Col John C. Orndorff, 'Aspects of Leading and Following: The Human Factors of Deliberate Force', Chap. 13 (351–80).
25. Ibid. Col Frederick Coleman, 'C2 — Distributed Control', *The Mitchell Forum*, No. 50, January 2023, available at https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org/app/uploads/2023/01/MI_Forum_50-C2-Distributed-Control-FINAL.pdf, accessed on 23 February 2026.
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Blue-Yonder/, accessed on 23 February 2026; Hostage and Broadwell, 'Resilient Command and Control: The Need for Distributed Control', *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 74, July 2014, p. 39.

27. *Joint Doctrine Publication 0-30: UK Air Power*, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, UK Ministry of Defence, Shrivenham, 2022.
28. *AAP 1000-1: The Air Power Manual*, 7th ed., Air Power Development Centre, Royal Australian Air Force, Canberra, 2023.
29. *Décentralisation of Command and Control (C2) of Air Operations*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), Paris, 2020. Philippe Gros, *Decentralisation of Command and Control (C2) of Air Operations*, Recherches & Documents No. 16/2020, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Paris, October 2020, pp. 5–6. The FRS study notes that this decentralisation 'is inseparably linked to the history of air power and its institutions' and traces the subsidiarity principle to the Prussian *Auftragstaktik* developed during the Napoleonic era. See also CICDE, *Commandement des engagements opérationnels hors du territoire national*, Doctrine interarmées DIA-3.0_CEO_L1_HTN (2019), No. 127/ARM/CICDE/NP, 17 July 2019, 66, for the delegation architecture from CEMA to JFACC.
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34. *Doctrine of the Indian Air Force.* Indian Air Force, New Delhi, 2022, p. 17, available at https://cms.spacesecurityportal.org/uploads/IND_Doctrine_Air_Force_832d5b6c62.pdf, accessed on 19 March 2026.

35. 'Operation SINDOOR: The Rise of Aatmanirbhar Innovation in National Security India's Growing Technological Self-reliance', Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 14 May 2025, available at https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NoteId=154455&ModuleId=3&reg=3&lang=2; Gp Capt (Dr) Dinesh Kumar Pandey, 'IACCS: Proves Mettle of IAF's Network Centric Operations', CAPSS, 23 May 2025, available at https://capssindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/CAPS_EV_DKP_23_5_25.pdf, accessed on 25 February 2026.
36. *Land Warfare Doctrine – 2018*, Headquarters Army Training Command (ARTRAC), Shimla, 2018; *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, Naval Strategic Publication 1.1,Naval Headquarters, New Delhi, 2009; amended 2015. Neither document employs the phrase 'Centralised Command – Distributed Control – Decentralised Execution'. The earlier Indian Maritime Doctrine (NSP 1.1, 2009; amended 2015) likewise did not contain this formulation. The LWD 2018 remains the Indian Army's current publicly released doctrinal document.
37. Group Captain VP Naik, 'India's Higher Defence Reforms: Tactical Brilliance or Strategic Coherence', CAPSS, 29 November 2025, available at https://capssindia.org/indias-higher-defence-reforms-tactical-brilliance-or-strategic-coherence/, accessed on 25 February 2026.
38. 'Report No. 3 of 2016: Performance Audit of Operational Capability of the Indian Air Force', Comptroller and Auditor General of India, Government of India Press, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 13–17.
39. 'India's Higher Defence Reforms: Tactical Brilliance or Strategic Coherence?', CAPSS, 28 November 2025; and 'Air Power Musings: Theatre Commands – Redux', CAPSS, 18 January 2026, both arguing for a Joint Forces Headquarters at apex level with operational authority, including transfer of the DoD's warfighting mandate to the COSC and JFHQ.
40. 'Defence Reforms in India', Briefing Paper 5,: CUTS International, Jaipur, 2023, pp. 9–10, noting that HQ IDS's impact has been 'marginal on resource optimisation and enhancing combat capability'; V.P. Naik, 'Air Power Musings: When Structure Lags Strategy – The Theatre Command Fallacy', CAPSS, 12 February 2026, arguing for a Joint Force Headquarters that is 'not just another HQ IDS but a transformed and effective organisation capable of wielding Comprehensive National Power (CNP)'.
41. Coleman, 'C2—Distributed Control'; *Air Force Doctrine Publication 3-0.1, Command and Control*, Department of the Air Force, USAF, Washington DC, January 2025. This publication provides the most current articulation: 'Distributed Control is the delegation of specified authorities from the air component commander to subordinate commanders to C2 assigned operations'.
42. *Air Force Doctrine Publication 1-1: Mission Command*, Department of the Air Force, USAF, Washington DC, 2023, pp. 14–15. AFDP 1-1 explicitly states that 'decentralized execution is the fundamental characteristic of operations guided by

a mission command philosophy' and that 'decisions regarding tactical employment are optimized when made by those closest to the fight'.

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