



# Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



## POLICY BRIEF

### Integrated Theatre Commands: Stage Set for Political Stewardship

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*(From left) CDS General Anil Chauhan, Army Chief General Manoj Pande, Navy Chief Admiral R Hari Kumar and Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari paying homage at the National War Memorial: National War Memorial Photo Gallery*

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## Integrated Theatre Commands: Stage Set for Political Stewardship

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### Introduction

At a conference conducted by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) in New Delhi on July 14, 2023, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan said that the theaterisation of the Indian military was on the anvil. In the past few weeks, the media has been abuzz with reports that the three services have reached a consensus on the broad contours of the theatre commands being given shape by General Chauhan.<sup>1</sup> There are expectations that the announcement on raising theatre commands could come soon.

Much debate has gone on in the three services on the theatre commands, and the action would now move on to the government, which has to give the final stamp of approval. Some opinions have been expressed that theaterisation is essentially a military issue, and once inter-service differences are bridged, most of the major concerns stand resolved. This would be a limited understanding of the implications of the ongoing military restructuring.

As General Chauhan has pointed out, the reorganisation of the military would be “the most ambitious change in the armed forces with far-reaching implications attempted post-independence.” It will not only stimulate jointness and synergy in the military, but it also has the potential to alter the nature of civil-military relations in India. Therefore, the political leadership has to study the proposal emanating from the CDS in great detail with a view to improving the quality of military advice for national security decisions, defining the roles and responsibilities of the CDS, service chiefs, and theatre commanders, while also take this opportunity to review the current national security architecture.

This brief looks at the proposed structure of the theatre commands and brings out some important issues that merit the political leadership's attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip, Snehesh Alex. “Army, Navy, IAF Finally ‘99%’ in Agreement over Structure of Proposed Theatre Commands.” ThePrint (blog), June 28, 2023. <https://theprint.in/defence/army-navy-iaf-finally-99-in-agreement-over-structure-of-proposed-theatre-commands/1646390/>.

## Proposed Structure of the Theatre Commands

The Indian military is currently organised in service-specific operational and functional commands. The Army has six operational and one functional (Army Training) command, the Air Force has five operational and two functional (Training and Maintenance) commands, and the Navy has two operational and one functional (Southern/Training) command. In addition, there are two tri-service commands – the Andaman and Nicobar Command and the Strategic Forces Command.

The command and operational control over the assets of the three services currently rests with their respective chiefs. This has resulted in operational planning being primarily carried out in service silos with little integration. The lack of jointness is visible not only in operational planning but also in logistics, training, and communication systems.

Theaterisation involves creating tri-service organisations that would be responsible for combat operations (as well as internal security duties) in their assigned geographic area. Assets from all three services would be placed under the theatre commander as required for executing the task. This would ensure jointness in the operational planning and greater synergy in battle.

Although there is no official word, there appears to be a plan to raise three theatre commands.<sup>2</sup> The Western Theatre Command, to be located in Jaipur, would be responsible for operations along the India-Pakistan border (including the Line of Control). The Northern Theatre Command, to be located in Lucknow, would be responsible for operations along the Line of Actual Control. The Maritime Command, to be located in Karwar, would be responsible for safeguarding India's maritime security from external threats.

The CDS is proposing that the theatre commanders be four-star generals, equivalent to the service chiefs. As the subsequent discussion will show, a four-star rank will give the requisite authority to the theatre commander and also provide options for how political control will be exercised over the theatre commanders. It is hoped that the rank structure does not get mired in the usual bureaucratic issues of status, equivalence, etc., that sometimes appear to take priority over functional requirements.

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<sup>2</sup>“Army, Air Force to Take Turns at Helming 2 of India’s Proposed Theatre Commands, Navy to Head Third.” Accessed August 18, 2023. <https://theprint.in/defence/army-air-force-to-take-turns-at-helming-2-of-indias-proposed-theatre-commands-navy-to-head-third/1664937/>.

While the proposed structure of the theatre commands seems to have been finalised, there are some important issues where greater deliberation is required by the political leadership. These are discussed below.

## Command and Control Over Theatre Commands

The issue of how the command and control over the theatre commands will be exercised remains unclear. Most informed writings in open source indicate that the CDS will exercise operational control over the theatre commands. Yet another option is for the theatre commanders to be under the direct operational control of the Raksha Mantri (Defence Minister).

Both models exist in militaries around the world. In the US military, the chain of command flows from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the Combatant Commander. The highest-ranking military officer, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), primarily has an advisory role to the political leadership. In China, the operational control over theatre commanders rests with the Central Military Commission, which is chaired by President Xi Jinping. In the Russian military, the Chief of General Staff (CGS) exercises multiple roles, including strategic conceptualisation and planning, readiness and preparedness, structuring the chain of command, and inter-service and interagency coordination.<sup>3</sup> The CGS does not have direct operational control of Russian forces, but officers of the General Staff are embedded with field units and participate in day-to-day operations planning.<sup>4</sup>

Both models are being discussed below in the Indian context. No recommendation is being made, as this will need deliberation at the political level. The command and control of theatres is not merely a military issue, but also involves the larger conceptualisation of how political control will be exercised over the military while maximising efficiency and professionalism.

## Theatre Commanders under the CDS

According to his current functions, the CDS has multiple roles. He is the Principal Military Advisor to the Raksha Mantri on all Tri-Service matters and heads the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) in the Ministry of Defence. He is the Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and the Military

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<sup>3</sup> Blanc, Alexis A., Alyssa Demus, Sandra Kay Evans, Michelle Grisé, Mark Hvizda, Marta Kepe, Natasha Lander, and Krystyna Marcinek. "The Russian General Staff: Understanding the Military's Decisionmaking Role in a." RAND Corporation, March 22, 2023.

[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1233-7.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1233-7.html).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Advisor to the Nuclear Command Authority. He is also responsible for administering the Tri-Service organisations/agencies/commands.

When the appointment of the CDS was approved, his primary function was to bring about jointness among the services. The government had specified that the CDS would not exercise any military command, including over the three Service Chiefs, so as to be able to provide impartial advice to the political leadership.<sup>5</sup> If the CDS has to now exercise operational control over theatre commanders, the restriction on not exercising military command will have to be lifted.

In this contingency, all the operational assets of the three services will be under the control of the CDS. This centralised model will put doctrine development, capability planning, force restructuring, and operational command and control under the CDS. This could result in a clear chain of command and faster decision-making.

For this model to work efficiently, the staff under the CDS would have to expand significantly, even as the service headquarters undergo a major reorganisation. If the CDS has a direct command responsibility, the operational and intelligence directorates of the service headquarters would have to move under the CDS. It is also worth considering that the Integrated Defence Staff and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) merge to create a single functional organisation based on the revised responsibilities of the CDS.

There is a concern that the CDS could have too much on his plate. As Secretary DMA, the CDS is also responsible for matters pertaining to manpower planning, pay, personnel management, training, works, and procurement, less capital acquisitions. These could demand attention that would distract from the CDS's primary role as an operational commander. To reduce the CDS's administrative load, some of the DMA functions that were removed from the ambit of the Department of Defence in 2019 could be returned to the Defence Secretary.

The political leadership must also decide how much authority they wish to invest in a single appointment and how they wish to receive military advice. A CDS with expansive administrative and operational powers would literally become a single-point advisor, particularly as the authority of the service chiefs is curtailed. This decision would impact the nature of future civil-military relations in India, and thus needs to be deliberated upon carefully.

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<sup>5</sup>"Cabinet Approves Creation of the Post of Chief of Defence Staff in the Rank of Four Star General." Accessed August 22, 2023.  
<https://pib.gov.in/pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1597425>.

## Theatre Commanders under the Raksha Mantri

The second model is for the theatre commanders to report directly to the Raksha Mantri. In discussing this, some apprehensions have been expressed that the Raksha Mantri generally does not have the requisite military experience and, therefore, should not directly oversee operational issues. In my view, this concern is overstated, as the political leadership must be more closely invested in all matters pertaining to military strategy, planning, capability, and operations.

In the existing command and control arrangement, the three service chiefs are already directly reporting to the Raksha Mantri on operational matters regarding their service. In this reporting model, the theatre commanders would replace the service chiefs and render operational advice based on a joint war-fighting approach. This would also obviate the problem of narrow service parochialism that tends to creep in with the current arrangement.

The Raksha Mantri would be directly receiving inputs from theatre commanders on ongoing operations. The CDS would weigh in with a national perspective, while the chiefs would advise the minister on their respective service issues. This is a relatively decentralised model with more points of advice, competing requirements, and a greater division of responsibilities. These checks and balances are essential in a democracy, but there is also a potential for slower decision-making with many parties involved.

Would this dilute the role of the CDS, who is now outside the chain of command of combatant forces? The answer to this question depends on the responsibilities assigned to the CDS with regard to the theatre commands. For example, the US CJCS is responsible for overseeing the activities of the combatant commands and serves as the spokesman for the commanders of the combatant commands, especially on the operational requirements of their commands.<sup>6</sup> Every two years, the CJCS prepares a Unified Command Plan that reviews the missions, role, and force structure of each combatant command.<sup>7</sup>

The CDS could be assigned similar responsibilities to ensure that the theatre commands keep the CDS in the communication channel regarding their operational plans. In peacetime, the requirements of the theatre commands

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<sup>6</sup> LII / Legal Information Institute. "10 U.S. Code § 163 - Role of Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff." Accessed August 20, 2023. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/163>.

<sup>7</sup> Feickert, Andrew. "The Unified Command Plan and Combatant Commands: Background and Issues for Congress," n.d.



would be routed through the CDS to the Ministry of Defence. This would ensure that he retains his status as the Principal Military Advisor to the Raksha Mantri.

## Role of the Chiefs of Staff Committee

With the creation of the theatre commands, it is often stated that the role of the service chiefs would transition to only “raise, train, and sustain.”<sup>8</sup> This is sometimes taken to mean that they would be entirely outside the operational decision-making cycle. A similar situation would arise if the CDS is not in the chain of command of theatre commanders. This is a simplistic and incorrect understanding of the responsibilities of the CDS and service chiefs.

While the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) may not directly control the execution of combat operations, they nevertheless have a crucial role in the operational planning process. To put this in perspective, a clear understanding of their responsibilities is essential.

The COSC would be the body framing the National Defence Strategy of India. Based on this strategy, the CDS would formally articulate the joint military doctrine while the chiefs would do the same for their respective services. The strategy and doctrines would be the guiding documents for each service to allocate forces to the theatre commands. The COSC would also decide on the level of centrally controlled reserves to be maintained with respect to resources that all theatre commanders can utilise.

The COSC would also guide the military's capability development plan, with the CDS laying down priorities and resolving inter-service differences. The service chiefs would be responsible for their service's operational preparedness, capability development, and training. The chiefs would also carry out financial planning and expenditure of the budget.

The COSC would draw up the national-level operational plans that involve all the theatres. During wartime, the COSC would closely follow the progress of operations, give advice, and reallocate forces between theatre commands when required.

It is thus clear that while the chiefs may not be directly in the fighting chain of command, it would be wrong to think that they are completely divested of operational issues. They have a crucial set of responsibilities, and the

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<sup>8</sup> Gokhale, Nitin A. “Theaterisation: National Security Apparatus May Need Tweaking.” Strategic News Global, August 14, 2023. <https://stratnewsglobal.com/articles/theaterisation-national-security-apparatus-may-need-tweaking/>.

government must officially list these as part of the restructuring process of the Indian military. Surprisingly, the detailed responsibilities of the service chiefs are not listed in any official document, and this anomaly needs to be corrected.

## The Future of Existing Service Commands

With the creation of the theatre commands, there are some questions about the existing 17 service-specific commands. Would these be disbanded or remain in their current shape? If they retain their original structure, would this only add another layer of hierarchy that could impact operational effectiveness?

At this stage, it would be prudent to retain a majority of the operational commands and place them under the designated theatres. Three commands could be subsumed to provide the nucleus for raising the theatre commands. This recommendation is based on two compelling reasons.

First, the geographical spread of the theatres is vast. The land borders with China and Pakistan are more than 3000 km, though there is some reduction in length as the alignment of the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) differs from the borders in Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The maritime borders are approximately 7500 km.

The current state of road and rail infrastructure, service-specific communication networks, live borders, and the absence of joint logistics would make it difficult for the theatre commander to exercise direct control if the operational commands are removed. Until the theatres stabilise and significant improvements are made in the infrastructure, the current organisational structure should not undergo major changes.

Second, the existing commands are today the highest headquarters responsible for the direct execution of operations, both in war and in peacetime roles such as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. There is an enormous amount of knowledge, experience, and expertise that lies in the command headquarters. Disbanding these headquarters would mean losing this trove of knowledge, which could ultimately impact operational efficiency. As the theatre commands evolve and grow into their operational role, they would need the support of the command headquarters.

This may also be an opportune moment to convert the Defence Cyber and Space Agencies and the Special Operations Division to functional commands. These areas will be critical for future war-fighting and need an appropriate organisational status. This may not appear to be a priority at this stage.

However, now that a comprehensive review is being carried out of the military's organisational structure, the domains of cyber, space, and special operations must be given their rightful place.

## National Security Architecture

A significant reform of the Indian military is underway. It would be unfortunate if a review of the national security architecture and the decision-making process did not accompany this. There is a need to examine the complete national security apparatus to ensure that it is relevant to the current and future security challenges. While this is a separate exercise by itself, some of the issues that could become a part of the ongoing military reforms are:

- Revising the role of the CDS to become the Principal Military Advisor to the National Security Council and the Cabinet Committee on Security, in addition to the Raksha Mantri.
- Preparing a politico-military strategy for resolving internal conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast. Currently, there is little synergy between the military and the Ministry of Home Affairs at the strategic level.
- Formalising the Unified Headquarters (UHQ) structures for internal security issues involving forces from both the Ministries of Home and Defence and the state police. It would be helpful to have a small permanent secretariat of the UHQ that can help devise joint policies.
- Reviewing the current border management policies, particularly for the LAC, where there is an ambiguous dual responsibility between the Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police.
- Defining the roles and responsibilities of the CDS, service chiefs, and theatre commanders. There is a view that an Act of Parliament should approve the ongoing reorganisation of the military and the roles of senior appointments.<sup>9</sup> This would undoubtedly be an ideal situation, but whatever the method chosen, it is crucial that the roles are clearly laid down.

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<sup>9</sup> Chronicle, Deccan. "Manish Tewari | Stealth Not Good Mode for Doing Theatre Commands." Deccan Chronicle, August 12, 2023. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/columnists/120823/manish-tewari-stealth-not-good-mode-for-doing-theatre-commands.html>.

## Conclusion

The CDS appears almost ready to finalise the structure of the theatre commands and forward his recommendations to the government. The government, in turn, should closely analyse and debate issues regarding improving the quality of military advice, the chain of command of theatres, and the responsibilities of senior officers. This is also an opportunity to review and refine the national security architecture to address current and future national security challenges.

India is on the cusp of the most significant military reform since independence, and this would not only improve jointness and war-fighting ability but would also change the nature of civil-military relations in the country. The political leadership must make informed decisions by extensively engaging with the military and other stakeholders involved in national security.

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