



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

DPG POLICY BRIEF

A Process-led Approach towards Integrated Military Commands

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Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhaduria donned the Indian Army camouflage in spirit of joint manship at the combined commanders conference in Gujarat, March 2021. Source: Hindustan Times

L-R: Army Chief General M.M. Naravane, Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat and Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhaduria. Source: India Today

The AMPHEX-21 exercise conducted in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal from January 21-25, 2021 involved assets of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard. Source: Twitter/@IndianNavy

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By
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Introduction

The discussion on the creation of theatre commands to meet India's national security needs is generating a heated debate, some of which is ill-informed and brings no credit to the immense professionalism inherent in each service, nor to the larger strategic community. Ironically, displays of fractured thinking and lack of mutual understanding between the services is playing out in a country that established a Joint Services Academy (Wing) within two years of independence (01 Jan 1949) and the National Defence Academy (NDA) in December 1954, the first tri-service military cadets' academy in the world. Even in terms of in-service training, India has well-honed joint training institutions, where officers of the three services train together as they pursue their careers – as Majors (and equivalent) at the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC); as Colonels (and equivalent) at the War Colleges; and as Brigadiers (and equivalent) at the National Defence College.



Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhaduria donned the Indian Army camouflage in spirit of joint manship at the combined commanders conference in Gujarat, March 2021.

Source: Hindustan Times

The fact is that despite these career-long interactions, jointness has not been institutionalised. With very few tri-service command and staff billets available, the services seem to understand little of each other professionally. The current

organisational structures do not lend themselves to synergised operational planning, coordinated utilisation of resources and acting jointly to achieve national security objectives. This is because each service essentially operates in silos defined by its own threat perception and operational doctrine.

The need for integration has been evident for some time and has become acute in the current environment of high technology, multi-domain, short duration and limited wars, in the nuclear backdrop, meriting swift and dynamic responses. Such an environment requires calibrated management of the escalation ladder straddling across military and non-military verticals, for which the nation needs to prepare itself, within the constraints of resources and even more importantly, time.

The issue is not whether the services need to integrate, the answer to which is an unqualified 'Yes'. What is being deliberated is how to get such integration 'right' and achieve it expeditiously. Given the multiple threats that India faces, it has become vitally important to transform without getting operationally impaired.

Scope

The Scope of this Policy Brief is to crystallise the prerequisites for integration of the armed forces, including through the establishment of joint/theatre commands, and to suggest a phased but time-bound approach towards integration that maximises overall operational potential and optimises scarce resources, without majorly unbalancing the existing organisational structures in the process.

Background – the Need for Integration

To contextualise our deliberations, it would be pertinent to recapitulate the salient way-points in the process of the 'felt-need' of intensifying jointness.

The Group of Ministers Report in 2000-2001, following the 1999 Kargil (conflict) Review Committee, highlighted the weaknesses in the functioning of the existing Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) system, the apex body binding the three services. These included its failure to provide single point military advice to the government and to resolve substantive inter-service, planning, policy and operational issues, essentially owing to structural issues. The report recommended the appropriate revamp of the existing COSC System to

facilitate “jointness” and synergy among the Defence Services.¹ For achieving this outcome, the report also recommended the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).²

The primary rationale for this included the rendering of single-point military advice, administering the strategic forces and enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process. Another significant reason was “to bring about the required ‘Jointness’ within the Armed Forces”. The report stated that “the capabilities of the Armed Forces can be enhanced significantly, if rather than operating as three individual units, they operate with a high degree of jointness and in tandem with one another in the conduct of various operational tasks, including training”. This, it stated, was the demand of modern warfare. Two decades since, the complexities of the battlefield and the need to integrate have only intensified.

In continuation of this trend, an expert committee headed by Lt. Gen. D.B. Shekatkar (Retd.) was appointed by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in 2016 to recommend steps to enhance the combat potential of the armed forces and to ‘right balance’ the defence expenditure. The committee, in its report submitted in January 2017, recommended the creation of three theatre commands - a Northern Command for the China border, Western Command for the Pakistan border and Southern Command for a maritime role³. The committee, however, did not dwell on the methodology of this reorganisation, a task it left for the MoD and the Services to consider further.

On August 15, 2019 the Prime Minister, while announcing the appointment of the CDS, again asserted the need to “further sharpen coordination between the forces”, which would “make the forces even more effective”.

And finally, the Government notification on the appointment of the CDS, issued on December 24, 2019⁴ spelt out the charter, mandate and functions of the CDS and the newly created Department of Military Affairs (DMA) which was placed under him. Relevant extracts are as follows:

¹ GOM Report on National Security. Chapter 6 – Para 6.5 Pg 97-98. Accessed on July 13, 2021. <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf>

² Ibid. Para 6.18

³ Sushant Singh. “Joint Operations Versus Integrated Commands: Understanding a New Way to Fight Wars” The Indian Express, May 10, 2017. Accessed on July 14, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/joint-operations-vs-integrated-command-understanding-a-new-way-to-fight-wars-4648574/>

⁴ Cabinet approves creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff in the rank of four star General. Press Information Bureau, Government of India. December 24, 2019. Accessed July 14, 2021. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1597425>

- *Promoting jointness in procurement, training and staffing for the Services through joint planning and integration of their requirements.*
- *Facilitation of restructuring of Military Commands for **optimal utilisation of resources** by bringing about jointness in operations, **including through the** establishment of joint/theatre commands.*
- *As the Permanent Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, **administer** tri-services organisations, **command** tri-service. Agencies / organisations / commands related to Cyber and Space.*
- *Bring about **jointness in operation**, logistics, transport, training, support services, communications, repairs and maintenance, etc. of the three Services, **within three years of the first CDS assuming office.***
- *Ensure optimal utilisation of infrastructure and rationalise it through jointness among the services.*

With this rationale and background, the current narrative centres around the creation of Northern and Western Commands for China and Pakistan fronts respectively; leaving the existing structure of the Army's Northern Command unchanged; and the creation of Maritime and Air Defence Commands. Yet again, the nuances of the visualised reorganisation have not been spelt out.

Where does the Problem Lie?

A perusal of the various pronouncements since 2001 suggests that the focus of defence reforms put into motion belatedly with the appointment of the CDS is on '*enhancing operational efficiency and optimal utilisation of individual service resources in an integrated manner, eliminating wasteful overlaps*'. Of these two elements, the overriding emphasis should of course be on the former.

The basic problems in the current pattern of 'single service' planning and functioning that are detrimental to operational efficiency and national security goals are:

- First and foremost is the service-specific interpretation of the loosely defined National Security and National Defence Policy. The defence minister/Raksha Mantri's operational directive does not address this issue. This, in turn, results in perception based and compartmentalised planning.

- This is compounded by the absence of political directions from the CCS, leaving each service to interpret its role and asset employment according to its own doctrinal thinking. No doubt there are consultations, but these are driven mainly by individual service perceptions and biases. Take the case of the present standoff in Eastern Ladakh, where it is hard to identify the single commander responsible for overall operations.
- Non-existence of a single authority, at the theatre or apex level, to institutionally coordinate inter-service plans, reconciling single service perceptions and expectations, i.e., to make each service speak a language understood by all.
- Absence of a common national intelligence picture integrating inputs of all services, and other national agencies like the NTRO/ISRO etc. that would result in real-time intelligence sharing. This is missing even between the services.
- Absence of contingency operational planning based on a visualised escalation ladder, with a distinct possibility of successive rungs of action and response straddling multiple domains, e.g., the action and response may rapidly shift between continental, air, maritime, space or even strategic domains.
- A paucity of overall resources, in particular air assets, long-range vectors and force multipliers, and the inability to shake-off a sense of ownership to allow resource use by/for the other service(s).
- Lack of coordinated, intra and inter-service prioritised capability development and acquisition plans, resulting in sub-optimal utilisation of meagre defence budgets and inability to develop the desired threat mitigation capabilities.
- Non-availability of commanders and staff trained in a joint service environment to function in an integrated manner; the continued inability of the system to impart requisite training, due to lack of institutional capacity and integrated staff billets.
- Inadequate intra and inter-service integration for network-centric warfare.

- Absence of a viable yardstick to arrive at an 'optimum span of control' (geographically, and in terms of the number of formations/personnel to be placed under command and control) of commanders, including theatre commanders, given the current state of the tri-service network integration; the terrain, connectivity, cross-domain professional expertise available; and the human capacity of commanders and staff.

Recognising the above, there is a definite need for integration of the services to deal with the overall threat envelope by **optimising plans and resources**. Due consideration needs to be accorded to the core competency, domain specialisation, resources, culture and ethos of each service, optimised to achieve the defined politico-military objectives.

Approach to Theatreisation in the Indian Environment

From the reports and interviews of senior military officials appearing in the media, it is evident that deliberations are underway to reorganise the current structure of the Indian armed forces into integrated theatre and functional commands. The ongoing debate is accompanied by veiled suggestions that the theatre commands may be announced as a unilateral political decision in the near future. Considering the adverse organisational and security implications that such a unilateral announcement may have, some ideas on progressively evolving jointness in the run-up to creation of integrated commands are discussed below.



L-R: Army Chief General M.M. Naravane, Navy Chief Admiral Karambir Singh, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat and Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria. Source: *India Today*

At the outset, a vision document needs to be evolved spelling out the overall concept of developing jointness among the services in the Indian environment. Ideally, a theatre command is expected to have all the required combat and logistic resources for integrated force application, under the theatre commander. To achieve this in totality seems impractical, at least in the near future. This needs to be accepted as a 'term of reference' and a constraining factor. Within this reality, the pragmatically desired integrated structures and their phased evolution needs to be defined, with milestones and timelines. Priority needs to be accorded to integrating operational plans for various contingencies. Emphasis should be placed on addressing how the critical existing shortcomings of knowledge-empowered commanders and staff, paucity of critical resources of weapons and equipment, doctrine, training and inadequacies of intercommunications will be overcome. Defining a delineated chain of command-and-control, including the channel of reporting, is also imperative.

Another critical consideration is determining an 'optimum span of control' for a theatre commander, for this in turn will determine the size of the building blocks. This consideration needs to be India specific, being a function of terrain, connectivity, communications, professional expertise of commanders and staff and the basic human capacities.

Most conceptual, non-classified aspects of these deliberations can well be put in the public domain to seek constructive suggestions, as well as to assure all stakeholders, within and outside the services, of the level of rigour that is going into planning this transformation. As of now, this remains a serious void.

There are primarily three options to progress towards the concept of creating integrated commands:

- **Option 1:** Create adequate building blocks for tri-service organisations and make up deficiencies of major weapons and equipment before venturing into theatreisation. (*Too time-consuming and likely to perpetuate the status quo*).
- **Option 2:** Create theatre (geographic) and select functional command(s) (e.g., Air Defence/Cyber/Space/Logistic Commands) and evolve progressively. (*Too disruptive considering India's security environment*).
- **Option 3:** Phased but simultaneous evolution of jointness and theatre/functional commands, building upon processes and resources

incrementally (*Adequately balanced in diligence and speed and hence the most suitable*).

A Possible Way Ahead

One possible approach to creating Integrated Commands is suggested below, based on Option 3 above, i.e., *phased but simultaneous evolution of jointness and theatre/functional commands, building upon processes and resources incrementally*. A time frame of three to four years (2024-2025) is visualised for Phase 1.



The AMPHEX-21 exercise conducted in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal from January 21-25, 2021 involved assets of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard. Source: Twitter/@IndianNavy

Phase 1: Initial Integration Phase. The scope of activities in this phase is as follows:

Actions at the Apex Level of the Armed Forces

- (a) The process of formulating strategic guidance, and promulgating a common military strategy, to achieve collectively identified national

politico-military objectives, must commence at the earliest, even if the National Security Strategy remains a work in progress.

- (b) Identifying the nature and pattern of future wars in the Indian subcontinent (say, in the medium term, i.e. the period 2030-2035), factoring in the realities of terrain, disputed borders, emerging technologies, the capabilities of our neighbours in the continental domain and of regional players in the maritime domain. This exercise should preferably be undertaken as a combined effort of the services, defence industry/R&D organisations and think-tanks.
- (c) The above must emerge from extensive scenario building exercises.
- (d) Within this construct, each service should evolve detailed plans for the visualised single/two front/multiple domain threat scenarios. (*It is for this reason that at this stage the existing organisational structures of services should not be disturbed*).
- (e) The amalgamation of individual service plans to evolve integrated/lead service response options.
- (f) Extensive wargaming of likely scenarios.
- (g) Detailed planning and gaming of the visualised escalation ladder, with responses hopping around domain verticals. An appropriate representation of the SFC would be useful, wherever the action/reaction is likely to spill over into the strategic domain.
- (h) Based on the integrated operational plans evolved, develop an intra and inter-service prioritised capability development and budget supported acquisition plan.
- (i) An outline plan for initial deployment/redeployment of limited assets (air force, long-range vectors, strategic) and the contingency allotment of these for cross theatre and strategic tasks.
- (j) Overriding emphasis on networking all the services and agencies for seamless communication and for creating appropriate battlefield management systems.
- (k) Evolving a pragmatic joint training doctrine and institutionalising of integrated training curriculum.

- (l) Detailed consideration of management of the hinterland, including critical aspects of national mobilisation; assigning responsibilities for rear area security.

- (m) While the planning and coordination process is underway, some concrete actions also need to be initiated to dismantle the existing structures and to create newer ones. These could include:
 - i. Placing attack helicopter units of the Air Force and at least two units of medium-lift helicopters (MI-17s) required for tactical airlift of troops and basic air maintenance tasks, under the command of the Army. This could be done in areas of the present Northern and Eastern Commands and would set the precedent of operating within the chain of command of the other service. Such allocations would align with the recommendations of an MoD appointed committee in 2012.
 - ii. Placing some Army Air Defence units under the operational control (or command) of appropriate Air Defence HQs of the Indian Air Force, as building blocks towards the Air Defence Command HQ.
 - iii. Placing the Army brigade earmarked for amphibious operations under Naval/Maritime Command.
 - iv. Integrating personnel and units of all three services to strengthen the Cyber Agency and to commence its up-gradation to a tri-service functional command under the COSC. This would help validate the nuances of exercising operational control at this apex level. A similar arrangement could also be contemplated with the Space Agency and the Special Operations Division.
 - v. Coordinated, nationwide grid deployment of all MALE (Medium Altitude Long Endurance) and HALE (High Altitude Long Endurance) UAV assets, with an integrated ISR network linking recipients of all the three services.
 - vi. Amalgamation of select training establishments, e.g., centralising all light helicopters and air defence personnel training.
 - vii. Merging logistic installations, provost and medical resources, wherever possible.

viii. Cross attachment and posting of officers and other ranks between the three services, to units and the formation HQs.

This will be an extensive in-house preparatory exercise, which must be led by the CDS and supported by an operationally oriented HQ Integrated Defence Staff and the Service Chiefs. The National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS), Strategic Forces Command (SFC) and the national organisations for cyber and space must also be appropriately incorporated.

The desired end state of Phase 1

By the end of Phase 1 (2024-2025), there should be:

- (a) Clarity on the nature of the battlefield environment that the armed forces need to prepare themselves for.
- (b) Availability of integrated operational plans.
- (c) Optimum size force levels of the armed forces.
- (d) Clarity on conceptual aspects of force structuring, viz. decisions on issues related to the aircraft carrier and submarines; employment of manned/unmanned aerial systems; command and control of attack and medium-lift helicopters and Air defence; inter-se weightage to rockets and missiles; and proportionate weightage to different domains for capacity building.
- (e) The implementation of intra and inter-service prioritised acquisitions.
- (f) A sense of direction for the indigenous defence industry, R&D and innovation.
- (g) Availability of human resources trained to operate in a joint services environment.

A Caveat

This phase, which primarily entails in-depth joint planning, should avoid major disruption of existing single service organisational structures. This will ensure that the existing formation HQs are in place to fully support the evolutionary planning process and be prepared for any contingencies if they ensue. No additional posts need to be sanctioned to any service at this stage since the

requirement for these, including the command slots for various theatres, would emerge from the joint plans as they get evolved.

Actions at the Level of Command HQs and Below

The command HQs of individual services and the formations below these play a significant role in supporting operational planning at the apex level. Also, they have a vital role in maintaining an operational balance against any external threats that may manifest during the transition phase. A suggested process is given below.

- (a) Retain existing command HQs of all three services, i.e., 17 single-service commands. Within the existing organisational construct, revise delineation of geographic Areas of Responsibility (AOR) of the Army and Air force commands to align their boundaries (e.g., removing anomalies like the Western Air Command (WAC) covering AOR of the Army's Northern, Western and parts of SW Command). The aim should be that each geographically aligned theatre (Command) should have an equivalent, three-star, C-in-C level officer from the Army and Air Force (or the Air Force and Navy, where applicable) for the formulation of integrated operational plans for the designated area. In undertaking this exercise, no reallocation or redeployments of assets needs to be carried out.
- (b) To those for whom "Integration" entails reducing 17 single service commands to fewer (5-6) numbers of integrated commands, a clear message needs to be sent that the reduction of manpower that may accrue by reducing the total number of HQs (*although the size of an Integrated HQ is likely to be always bigger than single service HQs*) is of marginal consequence in comparison to developing integrated operational and capability development plans. Also, at the present juncture, the visualised span of command and control extending across the entire length of Western and Eastern borders as well as along the entire coastline and island territories is too vast to be managed by a single HQ.
- (c) Following the above process, **three Integrated theatre HQs** are recommended to be raised and superimposed over existing command HQs of two/three services. This would entail one theatre Command HQ each, placed over the Eastern and Central Army-Air force Commands; Western, South Western and Southern Army-Air Force Commands; and one for the Northern Command. These HQs should be staffed by

carefully selected officers and headed by a three-star, C-in-C level officer from any of the services, preferably with a joint services experience.

- (d) It would be helpful if these theatre commanders are former C-in-Cs.
- (e) The superimposed theatre commanders should derive their authority from the CDS and the COSC, but should not be placed in the chain of command between the C-in-Cs and their respective chiefs, at least for the duration of Phase 1. They should however be vested with complete authority for inter-service reconciliation /optimisation.
- (f) To strengthen their authority, certain powers vested in the DMA/additional financial powers should be delegated making them administratively more powerful than the C-in-Cs. Other enabling incentives can also be considered by the MoD/Service HQs (e.g. a one-year extension in service over the C-in-Cs/ other Lt. Gen. rank officers).
- (g) The Theatre Command HQs could be assigned the following responsibilities:
 - i. Formulation of integrated operational and contingency plans, as applicable to the respective theatre, under the oversight of the COSC.
 - ii. Creation of a functional Defence Communication Network for seamless inter-service communication within their AOR.
 - iii. Synergising the theatre surveillance picture as the hub of operational and strategic level intelligence inputs from all the services/agencies. Control of the individual services surveillance assets, except those required for tactical level intelligence, should be vested in the theatre HQs.
 - iv. Control of all organisations/assets for Cyber and Space operations, in support of the concerned theatre.
 - v. Reconciling, in a time-bound manner, inter-service differences related to the use of aviation bases, air space, air defence assets etc.
 - vi. Optimising the use/holdings of common weapon platforms/systems held by different services.

- vii. Amalgamation of administrative and logistic installations and repair and maintenance facilities (wherever possible).
- viii. Visualisation of challenges of management of responsibilities and assets in the hinterland, a task carried out hitherto by static (Area/Sub-Area) HQs.

The activities for Phase 1 would need to be steered by the CDS and supported by staff at the HQ IDS. This entails enforcing integration by force of logic, overcoming resistance from individual services. This would require freeing the CDS of his administrative responsibilities at the DMA and restoring the HQ IDS to its original construct by reverting military officers absorbed as AS/JS in the DMA. The DMA can be placed under the CISC and a VCDS, from a different service than the CDS, appointed to assist in operational planning.

For a transformational exercise of this magnitude, it would be appropriate to testbed this concept. It is recommended that this be carried out in the Western theatre, i.e., in the existing AOR of the Army's Western, South Western and Southern Commands. This offers the advantage of not being directly committed to operations and provides the opportunity to integrate all verticals.

Air Defence Command

The highest levels of integration are inherent in planning for the air and ballistic missile defence of the nation. Even in the present environment, irrespective of each service holding integral air defence weapon systems, the overall responsibility of coordination and control rests with the Indian Air Force. The backbone of an effective air defence system is the integrated battle management and control system. The Air Defence Control and Reporting system enables accumulation of the air situation picture, carrying out IFF (identification friend and foe), prioritisation of threats, identification of weapon fire areas and no-fire zones, allocation and designation of weapons to targets and shifting these dynamically, in real-time. While the process of integrating the Air force IACCS (Integrated Air Command and Control System), the Army's 'Akash Teer' and Navy's 'Trigun', is underway, there is still a long way to go.

It may be prudent to initially designate an Air Defence Command HQs, which could start looking at the overall integration of the Air Defence Control and Reporting Systems and assets, without unbalancing the current structures. The designated HQ should also look at critical voids of sensors, hardware and software and prioritise acquisitions, transcending individual service boundaries. The systems once developed would need to be extensively tested

in simulated and real air threat scenarios, before being fielded operationally. The nuances of deployment and management of assets between theatre and Air Defence command could be evolved progressively. While the process is recommended to be commenced in Phase 1, it may be appropriate to field it only in Phase 2.

Maritime Command

The Navy, with its integral air assets, is reasonably self-contained to operate independently. Some integration, however, would still be required with the Army for amphibious operations and with the Air Force for air resources. These aspects can be coordinated as part of the optimisation of operational plans, as discussed above. What merits greater deliberation is the ability of a theatre commander to control both the eastern and the western seaboard, and the ability to exercise command and control over all assets and carry out all functions in the hinterland.

One of the fundamental issues in operational planning for the maritime domain is the inter se relationship with operations in the continental domain. The employment of the Navy in a combat role entails a level of escalation, which would impact other domains. These politico-military considerations are best addressed at Delhi, where the theatre commander is unlikely to be based.

The creation of a Maritime Command in the Indian Context thus requires further deliberation during the course of Phase 1.

Phase 2: Mid Term Integration Phase

The contours of Phase 2 restructuring and reorganisation can best be evolved only after gaining the experience of the Phase 1 transformation. This may entail:

- (a) Giving operational responsibility to the CDS/COSC and restructuring HQ IDS as an overarching Integrated operational HQ.
- (b) Placing Integrated theatre/functional commands directly under the CDS/HQ IDS.
- (c) Reorganising theatre command and single service command HQs by reducing the number of HQs and reducing a layer of command (either eliminating Corps or Command HQs).

- (d) Sub-allocation of certain dedicated resources to each theatre and earmarking some superimposed resources for strategic or inter-theatre employment.
- (e) Confining responsibility of the respective service chiefs only to 'raise-train and sustain' and vesting operational responsibilities in theatre commanders and the CDS.
- (f) Raising of the Air Defence Command.
- (g) Raising of the Maritime Command.

At this stage, there is little clarity on what organisational changes may be required in Phase 2 and subsequent phases.

Conclusion

The extensive experience gained over the years in countering external threats has brought about near unanimity on the need for the armed forces to be better integrated. The challenge is to evolve a model suited to the Indian environment and to adapt the same without getting operationally imbalanced. At the root of integration is the need to optimise plans and resources between the three services to deal with the multi-domain threat envelope. This entails identifying the desired integrated structures to be created and the nuances of their phased evolution in an environment of inadequate resources and sub-optimal tri-service domain expertise. The success of this ambitious exercise will lie in evolving a pragmatic roadmap for progressive evolution of new structures and systems.



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