

THE THEATRE COMMAND COMPLEXITIES

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The recent statement by India's Air Force Chief, Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh, where he warns India regarding the nuances of implementing the philosophy of theatre commands, necessitates a new paradigm in discussions and debates on the command structures of our defence forces. This is particularly crucial given the complex and rapidly evolving nature of India's security environment, which differs significantly from that of its neighbours and global partners. While theatre commands could facilitate smaller, potentially more effective command centres during crises, allowing for quicker mobilisation and better resource allocation, the concept itself originates from the United States' model, designed to coordinate and synchronise military actions at its theatre bases or forward bases. However, in adapting this model to India's unique strategic landscape, it is essential to consider the diverse challenges posed by threats from various fronts, including land, air, and maritime domains. Furthermore, the integration of advanced technologies and the emphasis on joint operations among the different branches of the armed forces should be prioritised to develop a holistic approach that takes into account not just immediate tactical needs but also long-term strategic goals.

This multifaceted approach will ultimately ensure that the proposed command structures align with India's overarching defence objectives and geopolitical realities, fostering resilience and readiness in an unpredictable global security environment.

China also has Theatre Commands, but the strategic and security imperatives for China are different from that of India, reflecting its unique geopolitical landscape and historical context. The Air Chief warns Indian policy makers regarding the critical need to identify India's own security challenges and requirements, urging them to facilitate policies and strategies that would effectively benefit our security architecture. Operation Sindoor has become an eye-opener to the pressing need for jointness in military actions, emphasising the significance of a cohesive approach through a system of Network-Centric Operations that can lead to optimum decisive results. However, achieving such jointness not only requires enhanced cooperation among the forces but also necessitates greater and more meticulous planning, especially as the three forces function with different resources and capabilities that must be harmonised for effective outcomes. This policy brief aims to identify the macro-level framework that is needed to strengthen India's deterrence vis-à-vis its neighbours, advocating for an integrated defence strategy that accounts for emerging threats and ensures that India remains resilient and prepared to face any challenges that may arise in the ever-evolving security environment in the region.

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THEATRE COMMAND AND THE RAISON D'ÊTRE

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has declared the year 2025 as the 'Year of Reforms' and in this respect, the idea of Integrated Theatre Command (ITC) has come into being, in which the assets of the Army, Air Force and Navy would operate under a single command across a specified geographical area. This integrated theatre command will be the result of the parliamentary bill passed in 2023 on the Inter-Services Organisation's (Command, Control and Discipline) Act to "*bolster jointness among the armed forces*" to "*face future challenges in an integrated manner.*" [1] [2]

The integration of resources and capabilities of the tri-services is believed to allow greater synchronisation of the assets and resources, thereby facilitating easier coordination which in turn enhances operational efficiency and effectiveness. This comprehensive approach is especially vital in today's complex and rapidly changing environments, as it enables greater mobility and rapid response capability in times of crisis. Furthermore, this integration is also believed to bring command structures of the three services to a centralised format, creating a unified command that not only streamlines decision-making processes but also enables a

more cohesive operational strategy. This centralisation is expected to significantly enhance communication between the different services, ensuring that all units are working towards common objectives with greater clarity and precision, ultimately enabling a greater scope for reduced errors and improved mission success rates.



The MoD has aimed for a unified war-fighting structure and to fructify this, it has also established the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) and created the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). [3] The MoD wishes to make the three forces shift from a fragmented command structure to a more integrated command structure under a single theatre commander over a specific geographical location to increase operational efficiency, reduce duplication, and make optimal use of resources. [4] This is a key focus for the first joint order, "Approval, Promulgation and Numbering of Joint Instructions and Joint Orders," issued in June 2025 for "greater precision and effectiveness." [5] The MoD also highlighted in 2025 the key features in theatre level command structure that would aid in the creation and integration of new war-fighting capabilities and faster assimilation of future technology and tactics, mitigating the limitations of single-service

operations.[6] Theaterisation of the military forces and assets is a major focus of the Defence Minister, Shri Rajnath Singh. [7]

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General Anil Chauhan, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) raises the concern for the need to ensure that war-fighting and operational planning is done by the theatre commanders while Chief of Army, Air Force, and Navy Staff would prepare the forces for war-fighting through the process of "raise, train and sustain function." [8] This means that the higher echelons of the Army, Navy and Air Force would be restricted to performing tactical roles, while the strategic roles would be allotted to the theatre commanders. He highlights that future warfare would need "deliberation, diligent prognosis, and an informed assimilation." [9] At present, the only two tri-services commands exist in India: the Andaman and Nicobar command that and the Strategic Forces Command (SFC). Nevertheless, while the former is a theatre-level command, the latter is a holistic command structure and the guardians of India's nuclear forces responsible for operational tasks should the need arise. The MoD plans theatre commands to counter threats from not only Pakistan and China by setting up such command facilities in Jaipur and Lucknow respectively, but also to exert its maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), by setting up command facility in Thiruvananthapuram. [10]



COMPLEXITIES

Ambitious as it seems, the formation of theatre commands is not without challenges, and these difficulties warrant careful consideration and strategic planning. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) also acknowledged the complexities of this structure that would need to be resolved, emphasising that such reform is not merely cosmetic but a “trailblazing reform” that could redefine military operations in the region. The focus is on jointness, a concept that the MoD has considered a prerequisite for the success of the theatre command, fostering collaboration across various military branches to ensure a cohesive operational strategy. [11] China has also adopted a theatre deterrence strategy, with its Western Theatre Command responsible for India, the Eastern Theatre Command overseeing Taiwan and the East China Sea alongside Japan, while the Central Command is tasked with lending support to other commands. The Southern Theatre Command focuses on the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, and the Northern Theatre Command covers North East Asia. [12] One key reason why China adopted this theatre-level deterrence was due to the nature of

its intended theatre-level conflicts, which it anticipates will occur in regions it considers its territorial right, despite their international status. Such an approach underlines China's assertiveness in asserting its claims. For the United States, theatre-level deterrence is deemed justified as US forces are strategically positioned in forward bases across the globe; hence, there is a pressing need for a robust command structure capable of quickly identifying emerging challenges and formulating solutions to meet rapid operational requirements effectively, ensuring readiness to respond to any threats that may arise in various theatres of operation.

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Nevertheless, India does not have theatre-level forces stationed anywhere other than India. This strategic choice reflects India's focus on its national security interests and the protection of its territorial integrity, as well as its commitment to the Principle of Sovereignty and the Principle of Territoriality applicable under the Westphalian philosophy of the state system. Moreover, India has yet to establish theatre regions to claim as their own, which further emphasises its defensive posture in a predominantly regional context. In contrast, China treats its People's Republic of Army Rocket Forces (PLARF) as a formidable component of its foreign policy objectives, utilising them to project power and influence beyond its borders. This difference in military posture indicates a divergence in the strategic priorities of both nations. For any effort which requires India's stand and voice on a global issue or exerting its influence in the global paradigm, such as climate change negotiations or international trade agreements, it would necessitate an effective amalgamation of hard power with soft power diplomacy. This synthesis is crucial for India to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape while asserting its role as a key player on the world stage, leveraging its robust cultural heritage and democratic values alongside its military capabilities.



This means that if India is to follow the US and Chinese principles of theatre-level command, under such circumstances, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) under the Minister of External Affairs would have to be included in all decision-making process making it more cumbersome. But in India's case, India is viewing its adversaries and associated geography into theatres, rather than following a Chinese model of theatres, but that notion is yet not clear from the Ministry's side. A thorough definition of what India's MoD decides as theatre-level conflict must be in a way that makes it comprehensible for common minds. Even if the Indian Navy is taken into consideration which exerts its influence outside the periphery of the Indian territory, and aspires to become a blue water capability, there is a modicum need for a theatre-level command to strengthen maritime deterrence. In fact, the reliance of its own defence by the denial mechanism Trigun with the Integrated Air Command and Control System (IACC), could prove more

conducive in maritime operations than rapid decision making as seen during Operation Sindoor. [13]

Also, the term theatre is meant for smaller arrangements of command. But in India's case, the term refers to a larger establishment, being viewed as theatre level to monitor theatre level (smaller establishment of command). Moreover, the theatre level command will be in charge of strategic planning, but in a low-scale conflict, there may not be a need for such commands and such commands could jeopardise the smooth functioning of the operations rather than hasten the same. Again, there has to be a clear focus on synergising the theatre-level command with the SFC as high-intensity conflicts could lead to an all-out nuclear war. In the Chinese perspective of its theatre command, there is an inclusion of its nuclear command as well.

China operates its theatre commands under the auspices of the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), President Xi Jinping, who plays a pivotal role in shaping the nation's military strategy and operational directives. These theatre commands, which oversee various military regions, are designed to respond swiftly to regional threats and maintain stability. Additionally, the nation's nuclear forces are also under the direct command of the President, reflecting a centralised approach to nuclear policy that emphasises national security and strategic deterrence. On the other hand, India's nuclear command operates differently; it is under the auspices of the Prime Minister, which adds a layer of political oversight and strategic decision-making. Conversely, while the Prime Minister leads the nuclear command, the armed forces themselves remain under the command of the President, showcasing a unique dual structure that distinguishes India's military governance and reflects its historical and constitutional context. This divergence in command structures between the two countries highlights not only their differing military doctrines but also their contrasting approaches to national security and defence strategies in a rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape.

Moreover, China's own theatre command is not without complexities. While for nuclear forces, the command structure is clear that the President would be the main decision maker for the same, for conventional forces, such discretions are allocated to commanders of theatre forces. This kind of command structure however, complicates deterrence for weapons with dual nature capabilities: that is weapons that could be used for nuclear as well as conventional roles. India, for instance, does not have dual-role missile systems, so the limitations of such command structures in case of dual-capable missiles may not be reflected in India's weapons deterrence. However, in case India wishes to possess such capabilities (which though it should refrain from), command structures would become more complicated.

The United States functions under a unified Combatant Command (COCOM) where a single commander for a specified geographic region is set up by the Unified Command Plan (UCP). [14] There are nine COCOMs, including but not limited to COCOMs, as the US forces are actively involved outside its own territory:

U.S. Special Operations Command

U.S. Strategic Command

U.S. Transportation Command

U.S. Africa Command

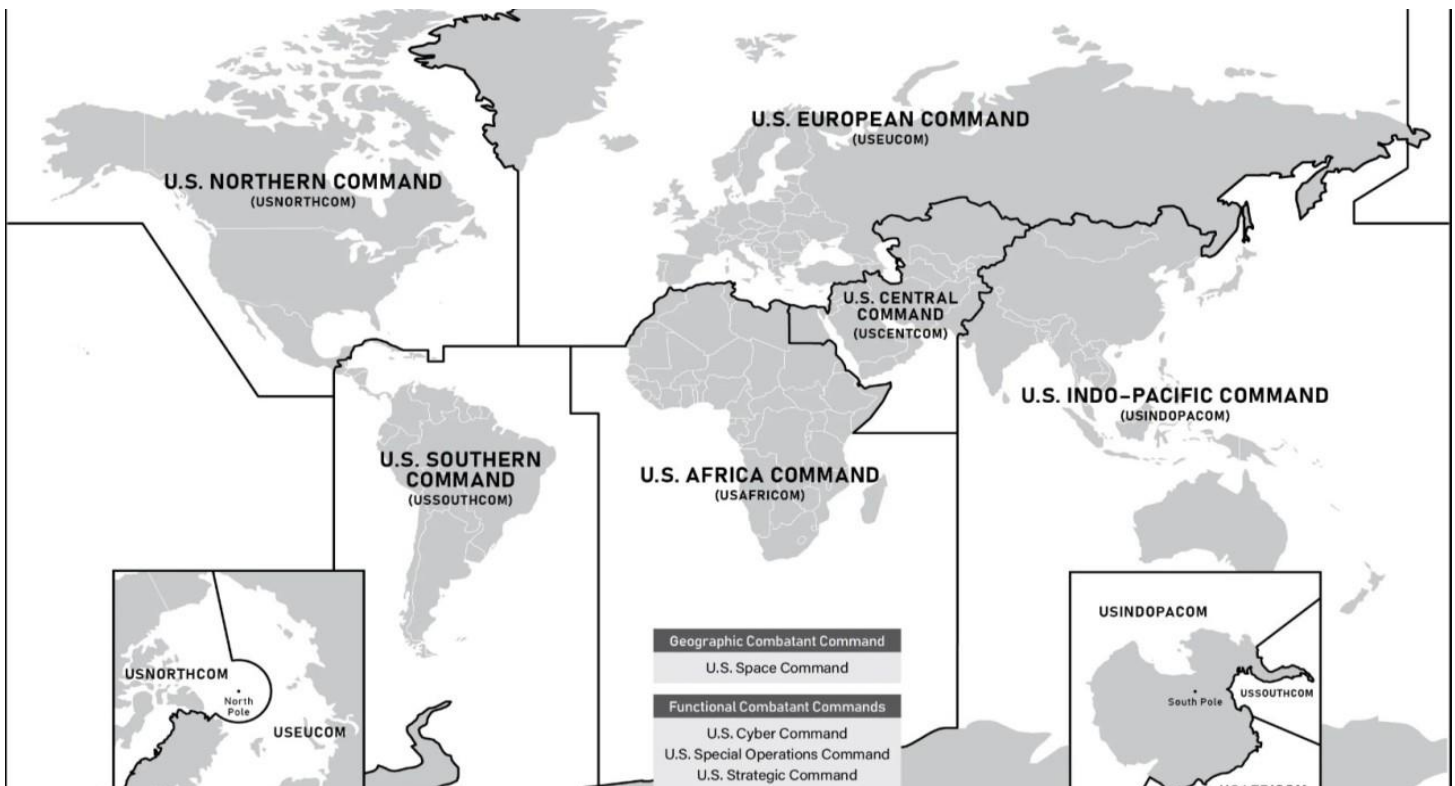
U.S. Central Command

U.S. European Command

U.S. Northern Command

U.S. Pacific Command

U.S. Southern Command



(World Map as per US DoD)

In fact, this implies that the United States actually does not have a theatre-level command system. The notion of the combatant command system is applicable for specific geographical imperatives or functional requirements. But in India's case, this command structure is merging geographical imperatives with functional requirements and amalgamating into one solidified structure. The author does not argue in favour of nor debate such an arrangement as every structural arrangement is unique to its own security needs. The author, however, wishes to highlight that amalgamating resources allocated for various tactical and strategic functions could become a cumbersome process and would require special monitoring and a holistic approach to ensure that each of the serving organisations can function under this command approach.

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As highlighted once by the Indian Navy Chief, “integration begins at the human level” requires integration of humans at levels that are under the command of commanders who are aware of the functional and operational advantages as well as hazards of their men. These hazards would need timely rectification in times of crises, for which commanders who are well adept with their resources would be best fitted to resolve. There is no person better than the commander of the relevant forces, that is, the Chiefs of the relevant forces, who would know their men, resources and their capabilities better. Restricting the role of the tri-services Chiefs to tactical roles could also undermine security imperatives in the long run. We could thus also argue that for formations that have an absence of a higher level command, but require rapid functional and operational decisions, for instance, an artillery brigade may lack a division but have a core level command, such theatre commands could prove beneficial, but not without complexities.

The concern regarding the complexities has also been raised by serving in the higher echelons of the Indian armed forces. The Air Force Chief, A P Singh, raised concerns regarding the nuances of theatre command; however, he acknowledged the need for jointness and tri-service synergy. [15]



THE WAY FORWARD

Firstly, India must clearly chalk out a clear conceptual framework of the theatre command, as this essential step will serve to guide the overall strategic direction and coherence of military operations. Developing this framework could make the comprehensive aspect of the structure much more fathomable for implementing the right policies and procedures necessary to ensure that such command structures become functionally and operationally successful. Moreover, this process should involve input from experts across various fields, emphasising the need for interdisciplinary collaboration that can enrich the planning and execution phases. Every organisation is subjected to glitches, whether through procedural inefficiencies or communication breakdowns, and each glitch that is highlighted would need a thorough discussion and pondering to improvise and hasten the combat operations. Open dialogues within the command structure could allow for a continuous feedback loop, enabling real-time adjustments that enhance responsiveness in dynamic scenarios.

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There is a need to structurise this command framework while still avoiding the limitation of the tri-services Chiefs and the commanders to merely tactical functions, as their extensive knowledge of geography, operational environments, and human resources would prove vital in any military operations. However, if that be the case, greater focus needs to be taken on addressing the duplication of command procedures. For example,

taking the same permission for a single task repeatedly from different command structures and formations not only complicates processes but can lead to delays that may compromise operational success. Streamlining approval processes through defined lines of authority could mitigate such issues, thus allowing for more efficient execution of military directives.

India needs robust command structures for swift operations, and the Operation Sindoor has become an eye-opener to the fact that adversaries' own preparedness with its defensive and offensive mechanisms will demand India's own offensive and defensive systems to function under complexities and pressures. Hence, the command structures formed should only benefit the tri-services' efforts to garner a decisive victory rather than prove a burden. [END]



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