

Need for Integrated Theatre Commands

Deepak Kapoor

Backdrop

The Indian military is one of the institutions that free India inherited from the British at the time of independence. Thus, in customs, traditions and culture, it has, by and large, followed the ethos of the British military. Even post independence, the Indian military has been influenced more by the British practices than other militaries of the world. Our organisational structure, at both the lower and higher levels, is based on the British model.

Being a colonial power, the British organised the Indian military in a manner that suited their interests best. In making changes/alterations/ additions to this organisation to suit our requirements post independence, we have followed an incremental approach whereby the basic structure has been retained and built upon. While this methodology was fine to begin with and met our requirements well for some time after independence, in the long run, the use of the incremental model on the same foundation is bound to have its constraining effects, and limit the options. The edifice that, thus, gets created is bound to crumble when it can no longer absorb further changes. The moot question that arises is whether this is the best organisational model suited for our present-day needs.

General **Deepak Kapoor** (Retd) is former Chief of India's Army Staff.

War-fighting has undergone tremendous changes in the last 70 years since World War II. Today, more than ever, the importance of integrated operations involving all three Services, backed by cyber, space and surveillance assets stands validated for the conduct of conventional operations. Land, air and sea need to be considered as one medium for the conduct of seamless operations using the most appropriate weapon systems to defeat an adversary. The Arab-Israeli conflicts, the 1971 Indo-Pak War and the invasion of Iraq are clear examples of use of joint/integrated operations to achieve success. While some may argue that even conventional warfare has been overtaken by asymmetric warfare, the latter is basically a weapon of the weaker side against a stronger adversary. Conventional warfare occupies the middle space, with nuclear and asymmetric warfare being at the extreme ends of the spectrum, and till nation-states are in existence, it cannot be wished away. Asymmetric warfare for a prolonged period is bound to give way to conventional warfare in order to achieve decisive results. Likewise, nuclear warfare is most likely to be resorted to only after conventional warfare has given a decisive edge to one of the adversaries. Thus, other things being equal, the side which can achieve better integration of its resources to fight a successful conventional war has much greater chances of coming out the winner in the present-day environment.

While the refinement in techniques and doctrines of war-fighting is an ongoing process, its evolution tends to stagnate if embedded interests and turf battles take over. Unfortunately, this is what has happened in India. With the knowledge of the political leadership of matters military being limited, its reliance on an equally ignorant bureaucracy for military advice has created a situation where the development of the organisational structure has not taken place in consonance with the changing environment. As a result, the individual Services have taken advantage and, at times, have protected their turf and promoted their narrow, parochial ends at the expense of national interest and national security.

Integration presupposes the ability of the commander to comprehensively understand the employment of all three Services components functioning under him.

Jointness and Integration

Conceptually, jointness implies synergised use of the resources of the three Services in a seamless manner to achieve the best results in the least possible time, thus, avoiding duplication and making optimum use of the available resources. In absolute terms, the validity of jointness as a concept in modern-day warfare is indisputable. However, the methodology of achieving this jointness has

varied from country to country.

For greater clarity, let us discuss jointness, as practised by us in operations, and integration in a little detail. Jointness, as currently implemented by us, implies that while the three Services progress and develop in their respective spheres, maintaining their independent identity, they function together and so coordinate their operations in war as to achieve the best results. To achieve jointness, coordinating mechanisms are constituted which plan for envisaged operations under various contingencies/ scenarios. In case the war takes a different course than what was envisaged, these mechanisms are expected to come up with a coordinated response, whereby the role of each Service in an ongoing operation is defined in a time-bound and sequential manner. Thus, while retaining individual Service identity, it seeks to achieve a coordinated response to developing situations during operations.

Integration, on the other hand, seeks to merge individual Service identities to achieve a composite and cohesive whole. It implies enmeshing the three Services together at different levels and placing them under one commander for execution of operational plans. They are, thus, an already dedicated resource which is employed by the commander in the manner he deems appropriate to achieve the best results. Integration presupposes the ability of the commander to comprehensively understand

the employment of all three Services components functioning under him. It aims at cutting down the response time to developing situations during operations, thereby exploiting fleeting windows of opportunity contributing to success in war.

From the above, it should be fairly clear that integration is a step ahead of jointness in ensuring a synergised approach to operations. While in jointness, the consent of the parent Service for allocation of a resource is mandatory, in the case of integration, resources from all three Services already stand allocated to the appropriate commander. In jointness, the employment of a resource is a subject of debate and discussion at a crucial time, while in integration, its employment is immediate, based on the commander's appreciation of the operational situation. Thus, the Kargil War would have been a much shorter affair if the Air Force had provided support to the Army's operations from the beginning rather than a few days later. While the Air Force may have had its own reasons for its actions, that is not under discussion here. What is relevant is that immediate Air Force support would have brought in synergy to win the war earlier. An integrated response ensures optimum utilisation of available resources, while a joint response may sometimes not. Finally, in a joint response, the possibility of inter-Service friction is much greater since differences in employment are bound to keep cropping up continuously as opposed to an integrated response where initial resistance to giving up one's turf having been taken care of during the reorganisational process, operations by the integrated force are likely to be more focussed and timely – a battle winning factor. It is for these reasons that most of the advanced countries of the world have adopted the integrated approach to conventional war-fighting.

Proponents of jointness often make the point that the domain knowledge of the integrated force commander is likely to be limited in respect of the other two Services components under his command, thereby limiting his ability to employ them in the most suitable manner

and at the appropriate time. However, once integration is adopted as a policy, cross-postings into other Services and joint institutions would be the norm and it would only be a matter of time when officers adept at handling all three Services with equal ease come up. No change can come about overnight. We need to work at it and since it is time consuming, ways and means to shorten that timeframe have to be evolved. In fact, we are already late in starting it.

Status of Integration: The Global Experience

In the US, the process of integration was started in 1986 when the Goldwater-Nichols Act was passed by Congress in the face of strident opposition from embedded interests, and today, postings to joint institutions are rated higher than those to Service-specific institutions. The culture of integrated operations stands fully established and is functioning successfully with theatre commanders employing the allocated resources of all three Services and the Marine Corps as they deem appropriate.

In the UK, from where the Indian defence structure has been inherited, the system has so evolved over the last half a century that jointness has become the norm and integrated operations form the backbone of war-fighting. In the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) promulgated in 1998, a Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) has been designated as the professional head of the armed forces and the Principal Adviser to the government. He is responsible for all operations, with resources allocated from the three Services. Again, in the UK, this integration had to be pushed through by the political hierarchy in the face of resistance from the three Services and the bureaucracy.

In the Russian model too, by the process of evolution, practicality and experience, integration seems to have taken firm roots. By a decree in 2010, four Strategic Commands have been created (Central, Southern, Eastern, Western) with appropriate allocation of resources from the three Services and independent arms directly under the Centre viz. missile,

space and airborne forces. Even though the Communist Party is the all powerful single authority in the Russian system, as opposed to democracies in the West, the importance of integration in operations is equally realised and appreciated by the Russians.

Similarly, in the Chinese model, which is a derivative of the Russian system, it is the seven Military Regions, each under a regional commander, which control the allocated resources of the three Services and the Logistics and Armament Departments, for operations.

When the logistics requirement of all the Services is somewhat similar in operations, it does not stand to logic that each of them follows its own planning, provisioning, transportation and delivery model.

Integrated Logistics

In the current system, each Service plans and caters for its own logistics back-up for the operations. This leads to tremendous amount of duplication, long inventories and colossal waste of precious resources. When the logistics requirement of all the Services is somewhat similar in operations, it does not stand to logic that each of them follows its own planning, provisioning, transportation and delivery model. With a little bit of forethought and coordination, it is possible to integrate the logistics organisations of the three Services and create one integrated structure which caters to the requirements of all, thus, optimising utilisation of resources. To support integrated operations, the need for integrated logistics can hardly be overemphasised.

Today, in all the leading militaries of the world, through a process of logical evolution, logistics already stands integrated. In the US, the Defence Logistics Agency (DLA) which is part of the Joint Logistics Environment (JLE) provides the requisite logistics back-up. In the UK, the Chief of Defence Material (CDM) performs the same function and

is a four-star rank officer. Likewise, the Russian and Chinese militaries follow a somewhat similar integrated logistics system.

The Current Picture in India

Today, in case of war, each Service Chief is expected to control the operations of his Service. To carry out his directions, he has functional commands headed by three-star rank Army Commanders (or equivalent in the Navy and Air Force). Thus, the Army has seven commands [Northern, Eastern, Southern, Western, Central, Southwestern and Army Training Command (ARTRAC)]; the Air Force too has seven commands (Western, Eastern, Southern, Southwestern, Central, Training and Maintenance); and the Navy has three commands (Western, Eastern and Southern). An interesting aspect to note is that none of these 17 commands is co-located at the same station! Each one is at a different station—as if a conscious effort has been made to stay away from each other and not tread on each other’s toes! Besides these, there are two tri-Service Commands [Strategic Forces Command (SFC)] and Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)], the command of which is rotated among the three Services.

Coordination of operations in case of a war is expected to be carried out in various committees set up under the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), which is headed by the seniormost Service Chief who is designated as Chairman, COSC. He, therefore, is expected to simultaneously perform both the roles of being Chief of his Service as well as the Chairman, COSC. The COSC generally functions on the principle of consensus. In practice, such a system suffers from serious flaws which can make the difference between winning and losing a war. Firstly, it is not possible for the same individual to take on the burden of two important offices simultaneously. Despite adequate staff, he is unable to devote sufficient time for both appointments, thus, doing inadequate justice to both. Related to it is the aspect that as Chairman, COSC, he

may be constrained to take decisions which are not necessarily in the best interests of his Service of which he is the Chief, thus, placing him in a serious decision dilemma. Secondly, the Chairman, COSC, has no authority to enforce a decision on the other two Services. Besides this, his domain knowledge of the other two Services is rather limited, leading to a reluctance in taking major decisions concerning the military without the concurrence of the other two Services. Thirdly, COSC decisions are expected to be unanimous which is rarely possible when each Service is concerned about protecting its own turf. Thus, precious time is lost in nudging the dissenting Service towards concurrence. Such delays in arriving at a consensus during an ongoing war may affect the very outcome of the war, which is detrimental to national interest. Finally, jointness cannot be achieved and put into practice when a war or a crisis is being faced by the country. Jointness has to be planned for, practised, and put into effect during peace-time, with various likely situations war-gamed. While the current practice provides for carrying out joint training on an as required basis, the level of jointness achieved would be much greater if an integrated command system is instituted.

Jointness has to be planned for, practised, and put into effect during peace-time, with various likely situations war-gamed.

Integrated Theatre Command System

There is an overwhelming need to get away from a Service specific approach to operations towards a system which avoids duplication, ensures optimum utilisation of available resources, brings in greater jointness, leads to timely and mature decisions to developing situations and ensures flawless execution of orders to achieve success in battle. This is where the integrated Theatre Command system fits in better in the scheme of things than the current system. It aims to put the resources of the three Services at the disposal of the theatre commander, keeping in mind the

tasks assigned to him, and thereafter leaves him free to train his command to make it a cohesive fighting force capable of achieving its designated charter in the shortest possible timeframe. The logistic resources required to support his operations are also placed at the disposal of the theatre commander so that he does not have to look over his shoulder for anything when the operations are ongoing.

The theatre commander would be expected to carry out his tasks in consonance with the overall national plan as approved by the political leadership and given to the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) for implementation. Thus, he would function under the directions of the CDS who would be responsible to the political leadership as well as the coordinator of all operations at the national level. It, therefore, also emerges that the need for Theatre Commands cannot be viewed in isolation but has to be a part of the total restructuring of the higher defence management system of the country. In this context, a brief mention of the report submitted by the Arun Singh Committee post the Kargil conflict is relevant. Constituted as a part of the Group of Ministers (GoM) formed by the government to review national security and suggest changes in the higher defence management of the country in 2001, it suggested integration of the Services Headquarters with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and creation of a single-point adviser on all military matters to the government in the form of the CDS. Post this restructuring, adoption of the Theatre Command system under the CDS, as existing in the West, to control and coordinate operations, was the logical next step. The government of the day accepted these recommendations for implementation. However, twelve years down the line, these have yet to see the light of day and are nowhere near implementation. Halfway measures like having a permanent Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee instead of a CDS, as being suggested by the Naresh Chandra Committee because of differences/ apprehensions over the CDS, are hardly likely to meet the national security requirement appropriately.

It is often argued that the US, Russia, China and UK have global interests and, hence, the integrated Theatre Command system is perhaps best suited for their requirements. In the case of India, we have no territorial ambitions on anyone's territory and we are primarily concerned with ensuring our territorial integrity, therefore, the existing system is good enough to meet our needs. Unfortunately, the proponents of this line of reasoning are missing out on the basic premise that integration ensures a more cohesive, timely and synergetic response in any scenario. It is inherently more suited as a concept than any other arrangement to accomplish national security goals. Therefore, we need to rise above the Service specific loyalties and turf battles to move towards integrated structures in the national interest.

It is also a fact that in the current environment, force multipliers will play a crucial role in determining the outcome of conflicts. Use of surveillance, cyber warfare, space and robotics can be better exploited to advantage in an integrated command structure than in any other organisation. It gives a commander a clear idea of his capabilities and limitations, thus, ensuring instantaneous employment to exploit fleeting opportunities in the noise and din of a battle, resulting in greater possibility of success.

Unlike in other major countries of the world, in India, the proportion of the three Services as part of the overall military is heavily skewed in favour of the Army. The Army constitutes 85 percent of the total military, with the rest being made up by the Air Force (10 percent) and Navy (5 percent). Because of their small size, there is invariably an apprehension in the Air Force and the Navy that they may be swamped by the bigger brother and, thus, lose their relevance to some extent. While these apprehensions may not necessarily be correct, and may be misplaced, they still need to be addressed specifically, if only to remove the feeling of mistrust amongst the Services. As long as national interest and merit remain the backbone of any restructuring, there cannot be any rational and legitimate reason for heart burning and unhappiness.

It is proposed that we move away from the current system and create integrated commands in addition to the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) and Strategic Forces Command (SFC) as follows:

- Northern Command. Incorporating the states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Uttranchal, Himachal and Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).
- Western Command. To include Punjab, Haryana and part of Rajasthan.
- Southwestern Command. To include the balance of Rajasthan and Gujarat.
- Southern Command. To include Maharashtra, Karnataka, Goa and Kerala.
- Southeastern Command. To include Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal.
- Eastern Command. To include Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura.
- Central Command. To include Bihar, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Puducherry.

The above is one suggested restructuring. Inter-command boundaries can be finalised after a detailed and indepth analysis. Other states not mentioned herein could fall within the boundary of one or the other command, depending on administrative convenience. In addition, there is a requirement of creating the following functional commands whose resources could be allocated to the integrated commands on an as required basis, depending on the tasks they are expected to carry out:

- Space Command.
- Cyber Command.
- Special Forces Command.

The next question that would exercise a military man's mind would be as to which Service should head these commands. It is my considered

opinion that, irrespective of the colour of the uniform, two main considerations should dictate the answer to this question. Firstly, the tasks that a command is expected to carry out should become the determining criteria. Secondly, merit and professional competence and not the colour of the uniform should be an important factor in conjunction with the first consideration to decide as to who should be the force commander and which should be the lead Service in a command. A dedicated and competent officer who can analyse the tasks assigned and has adequate knowledge of employment of all arms and Services under his command would be able to produce and execute a successful plan. It is more important to select the right person than worry about which Service he belongs to.

The tasks that a command is expected to carry out should become the determining criteria. Merit and professional competence and not the colour of the uniform should be an important factor to decide as to who should be the force commander and which should be the lead Service in a command.

A related aspect that would need to be tackled would be the acquisition of domain knowledge of various arms and Services and their integrated application. Not only the commanders, but the staffs must get used to integrated functioning. This requires much greater emphasis on joint training as compared to Service specific training, which has been the practice so far. As far as possible, all our training institutions should shift to joint training. Tenancing of appointments at the joint training institutions and Joint Staff Headquarters should become a precondition for progressing to senior ranks. Officers from all three Services should attend courses at Service specific training institutions to gain knowledge and insight into Services other than their own. The list is endless. In fact, a study should be undertaken to enumerate the steps required to

integrate the three Services and enhance jointness. Our efforts so far in this direction have been of a peripheral nature and touched the problem only at the fringes. The need is for a conceptual shift in our thinking towards integrated operations and ruthless implementation, overcoming Service prejudices. The whole process is a time consuming one and the sooner we get started on it, the earlier we would be able to achieve the ultimate goal.

The likely tasks that that may form the charter of the Indian military could be one or more of the following:

- Protection of the territorial integrity of the nation.
- Defence of the country against external aggression.
- Preserving the unity of the country.
- Providing aid to civil authority, whenever requested.
- Being prepared to provide resources for disaster relief in case of natural calamities.
- On directions from the Government of India, being prepared to proceed overseas for operations or provision of humanitarian assistance.
- Providing troops for UN peace-keeping missions on orders.

Depending on the geographical location of a command, a prioritised list of some or most of the above tasks would be assigned to it. The resources required to carry out these tasks would also be made available to the command. It would thereafter be its charter to work out detailed plans under different contingencies and rehearse the troops allocated from different arms and Services in executing these tasks in an integrated manner. Logistics support required by this force would also be made available to the command which would decide upon its deployment and execution in the most optimum manner. The detailed planning, coordination and rehearsals required to knit all the components into a cohesive whole and function like a well oiled machine is a gigantic task

which requires months/ years to prepare. This in itself is a forceful argument for shifting from the current system to one of integrated commands as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

Modern warfare is continuously evolving. Doctrines, concepts, methodology and weapon systems of war-fighting are constantly getting refined to achieve success in the shortest possible time. We have been witness to the massive differences in all these spheres during World War I and World War II. Post-World War II, a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has taken place in almost all militaries of the world. Driven by technology, these changes are likely to have a much more profound influence on war-fighting than ever seen hitherto. Real-time intelligence, transparency of the battlefield, cyber warfare, information warfare, space-based weapon systems, etc. are some the oft-spoken and discussed terms among military strategists in the present-day environment. A relevant and vibrant military needs to move with the changing times if it has to deliver.

In India, the military inherited a system which had been instituted by the British to serve their requirements best. While we made appropriate modifications to the then existing system to meet the needs of an independent India, in the span of the last 65 years, too many diverse and wide ranging changes have occurred, resulting in the system not being fully responsive to the emerging battlefield milieu. Our Service-specific approach to operations is inappropriate, potentially divisive and delays the response to emerging situations in a rapidly moving current-day battlefield. A commander needs to have pre-dedicated resources made available in the light of tasks envisaged for him to integrate them into an efficient fighting machine, making optimum use of their respective capabilities. Shifting to the system of integrated Theatre Commands would, therefore, be a step in the right direction.

While most advanced militaries of the world have already transitioned

Integrated Theatre Commands are by no means a panacea for all our military shortcomings. But they are an important edifice in the overall organisational structure that we seek to improve, to bring in clarity and efficiency in our military functioning.

to the Theatre Command system, we in India are still discussing and debating its relative merits and demerits. Since few on the political side have sufficient knowledge of military matters and the bureaucracy is unable to understand the nuances of war-fighting, the debate gets restricted mostly to military circles. Here, Service loyalties, turf protection and entrenched mindsets act as limiting factors to an honest and fruitful debate. The result is that we end up standing where we are, while the rest of the world keeps moving on to more progressive and innovative ways of war-fighting, to the detriment of our national security.

Sometimes, change has to be forced on unwilling stakeholders for their own good, if a consensus cannot be reached because of the reservations of a few.

Integrated Theatre Commands are by no means a panacea for all our military shortcomings. But they are an important edifice in the overall organisational structure that we seek to improve, to bring in clarity and efficiency in our military functioning. The CDS needs to be brought in for providing single-point advice to the political authority on military matters. Under him, integrated Theatre Commands need to be created to take control of all operational planning, rehearsals and execution of war-fighting. The Theatre Command system has taken a fairly long time to stabilise in the US after being instituted. We should be prepared for a similar gestation period, if not more, in our case. Therefore, we need to start working towards instituting it immediately if we are to remain effective, efficient and relevant as a military force. Prevarication and delay could prove detrimental to national interest in the long run.