

Jointness in India's Military –What it is and What it Must Be

P.S. Das

THE DYNAMICS OF MODERN WARFARE

Time and Space have collapsed in modern warfare. At one end, nations do not have the luxury of continuing to wage war for long durations. Apart from military, economic and domestic limitations, there is the coercive pressure of the international environment which does not permit much latitude. Therefore, the need to achieve strategic goals in the shortest possible time has become critical. The difference between tactical gains, achieved in a shorter time frame, and strategic benefits which could take longer, has blurred and future conflicts would focus on the latter from the very outset. For this same reason, political involvement in the conduct of military warfare has increased.

On a different plane, long range precision weapons have enabled parties to attack adversaries over great distances. This has nullified, to a great extent, the limitations of slow movement of battle which was the norm in earlier years. Added to these two is the networking of forces which not only enables real time sharing of intelligence and information between widely dispersed forces but also, if harnessed properly, permits the most appropriate and available resources to be brought to bear upon the adversary in the shortest possible time; to minimize the interval between sensing and shooting, ideally to zero, is the requirement. The speed of processing of information, decision making and execution are critical to achieve this objective.

Therefore, old concepts of jointness based on cooperation and coordination between different wings of the military with tri-Service execution are no longer enough; there is need to cement this with structures which are based on integrated planning and operations under one unified authority with responsibility and accountability. Such an institution will, obviously, have components of different wings placed under it but these would be subordinate to it and not to their own Service Chiefs. This is the requirement of modern warfare. The Indian system, in which these things are processed in a triumvirate fashion, is very unsuited to cope with the new environment.

Some naive arguments are projected by those who oppose changes. One of these is that the Americans need the kind of system that they have because their operations are stretched across the globe. This postulation is absurd. Sitting in the Operations Room of the US Central Command in Florida giving directions for operations in Yemen which would result in the neutralization of key Al Qaeda functionaries within ten minutes of their being spotted is no different to sitting in New Delhi and overseeing ongoing operations in the Arabian Sea or on the Western borders. Electronics provide real time data to both sets in the same time frame and the need for quick responses to developing situations is similar. It is not that the Americans must make decisions immediately while Indians have the luxury of time. Both must bring a variety of resources, some from different agencies, into play in the shortest possible time for achieving the best results. Also, networked forces now enable a composite picture to be available at Unified Headquarters instantly, unlike earlier scenarios when every platform reported to its own superior who then shared the information with others if he chose to do so. So, the type of coordinated trilateral operations which were typical of warfare in earlier days, are no longer appropriate or even relevant. The fact that almost all countries have followed the integrated command concept shows that this has nothing to do with global scale of operations.

HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS OF INDIAN HIGHER DEFENCE MANAGEMENT

To understand how and why India's armed forces operate the way they do, one needs to go back into history. Until 1947, when India became an independent country, military affairs of the dominion came under the purview of Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C), India, second in authority only to the Viceroy. Following the creation of a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) in Great Britain in 1923, a similar institution was also constituted in India but with a slight difference. Unlike the parent COSC, its Indian counterpart had the Chief of General Staff (CGS) at General Headquarters (later Army Headquarters) as the permanent head, reporting to the C-in-C. While the Chiefs of the Navy and the Air Force could approach the C-in-C and even the Viceroy if they felt this to be necessary, higher direction of all military forces, thus, vested under a single authority.

This picture changed after independence. Major General Lionel Ismay, Chief of Staff to Admiral Louis Mountbatten, the last Viceroy, was asked to suggest suitable mechanisms for higher defence management in the new nation. Ismay proposed a COSC comprising the three Service Chiefs with the position of chairman being held, not by any one service chief, but by the person longest in the chair; in other words, on a rotational basis. He also suggested various other arrangements under the COSC

to facilitate cohesion in the functioning of the three wings. This inter-Service structure was, by and large, a replica of the organization that had existed in Great Britain during the Second World War.

Interestingly, despite their overwhelming victory in that War, and the experience of having conducted several very large-scale tri-service military operations — for some of which they appointed Supreme Commanders, e.g., General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific theatre and General Dwight D. Eisenhower in Europe — the victors found serious flaws in their higher defence organizations. As a result, in the USA, a new dedicated authority termed Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), was constituted over and above the individual Service Chiefs, as the principal military adviser. All operational responsibility was vested in integrated theatre commands which had components from the three military wings subordinated to them. The Chiefs of Services were members of the JCS but had no direct operational involvement in their components. Many more changes have been made in the last six decades, many by legislation, requiring greater integration amongst the three wings of the military and this process is continuing.

In the United Kingdom, which had also seen Admiral Mountbatten as the Supreme Commander in South-East Asia during the Second World War, it took some time for the system to be reviewed. But by 1963, the UK had also abandoned the old system. The headquarters of the Navy, Army and Air Force were integrated with the Ministry of Defence. A dedicated Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was constituted, over and above the Chiefs of the Army, Navy and Air Force, as the principal military adviser; Mountbatten being the first to fill that position in 1959.

A dedicated and integrated Joint Forces Headquarters (JF HQ) was created under the CDS to exercise command over all operations in which the British armed forces might be involved. In the UK, more changes are progressively being made to further integrate the three wings of the military. Since then, almost all countries which operate credible military forces, e.g., France, Russia, Australia, and Germany have shifted to the integrated pattern of higher defence management with a principal military adviser. Even China, about as old an independent nation as India, follows that system.

THE EARLY INDIAN EXPERIENCE

Soon after Independence, India established two military institutions which were tailor made to promote jointness. One was the Joint Services Wing-later to become the National Defence Academy (NDA) at Khadakvasla to train young cadets to become officers in the Armed

Forces and the other, the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) in Wellington, Tamil Nadu which would bring officers of the three wings together once again after about twelve years of service. To these were added, in due course, the College of Defence Management (CDM) at Secunderabad at a more senior level and, finally, the National Defence College (NDC) at New Delhi at the highest level of Brigadier and equivalent rank. This framework for joint training of officers at different levels and to bring them together again at different stages of their careers was, therefore, well laid and continues till now. It has yielded very good results in bringing about inter-service camaraderie.

Even as the large-scale migration of communities was taking place in the immediate aftermath of the Partition, Pakistan's military forces, masquerading as freedom fighters, invaded Jammu and Kashmir. The ensuing conflict in 1947-48 was essentially an army action with air power used only to transport troops and equipment and to provide limited air support to ground troops. Later, in 1961, the military was again involved in a brief two-day conflict to liberate Goa, but this was without any opposition. Lieutenant General J.N. Chaudhari, then GOC-in-C Southern Command, was placed in charge of the overall operation. But that was the extent of jointness.

In the conflict with China in 1962, the Air Force and the Navy did not come into play at all and watched from the sidelines. Finally, the three wings did come to fight together against Pakistan in 1965 but without any preconceived plan. Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, IAF Chief at that time, has said on many occasions that he came to know that air support was needed only when hostilities had already broken out and the Army was under pressure in the Chammb sector. The Indian Navy went about doing its own thing, and was of no consequence to the war effort.

In short, in all these conflicts, whatever their extent and severity, it was essentially only land power that came into play. The Air Force did participate more meaningfully in the 1965 war but without much synergy with the plans of the Army. No post-conflict enquiries or studies were ordered. India proclaimed itself as the victor, without any supporting evidence; so did Pakistan. Such lessons as were learnt were not publicized and the manner of functioning remained unaltered.

THE 1971 WAR

The war with Pakistan in 1971 was the first real military operation since Independence in which all three wings of the Indian Armed Forces were full participants. By April of that year, it had been assessed that military conflict was likely, even inevitable. The Army Chief, General (later Field

Marshal) S.H.F.J. Manekshaw wanted time to complete preparations, for the monsoon season to get over and also for winter to set in so that mountain passes on the India-China border would be rendered impassable. These factors taken together, allowed the Armed Forces about seven months to get their act in order.

In this period, it was expected that the military would formulate a common and synergized plan into which operations of all three wings would be dovetailed. This did not happen. There was no integrated planning of the campaign which resulted in quite a few unplanned and uncoordinated decisions being made. As the war progressed, for example, the sudden decision to launch an assault on Chittagong, was soon changed to Cox Bazaar. The troops chosen, Gurkhas, with their short stature and relative unfamiliarity with water, were singularly unsuited for that purpose. There was no training, and beach survey, a crucial prerequisite, was inadequate. Not surprisingly, the operation was a total fiasco with no aims achieved and some lives lost. In another episode, IAF Gnats attacked Mukti Bahini vessels operating in the waters off Khulna without being aware that these were our own. One of the two boats sank, some of the crew killed, and others wounded and captured.

There is enough evidence in published literature of that conflict, principally from the autobiography of the then Air Force Chief, Air Chief Marshal P.C. Lal and the biography of the then Naval Chief Admiral S.M. Nanda, highlighting the differences in the way in which operations were planned and conducted by their Army counterparts. The attacks carried out on vital installations at Karachi from the air and by sea, were also not part of any combined plan. There are other instances of mismatch between the different wings. Lieutenant General J.F.R. Jacob, who, as Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command was responsible for conduct of operations in the eastern sector, has gone on record to say that the three wings of the military went about doing their own things without any synergy and that he, himself, disregarded the orders of the Army Chief in regard to the conduct of the land battle! No more needs to be said.

Victory in what was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) came swiftly, partly due to the demoralization of the adversary, and in the wake of resulting euphoria, few attempts were made to reflect upon and to correct the shortcomings. The argument was simple; the structure was working; it had just proved itself and there was no need for any change. Once again, the war was fought in a tripartite fashion with no unified or accountable military authority in command even though, as might be expected, the Army Chief was *primus inter pares* for the political leadership. Not unexpectedly, this reluctance to boldly institutionalize the ground reality resulted in more discord than harmony.

AT ODDS IN SRI LANKA

India's armed forces were called to action in 1987 once again, albeit in a somewhat modified role, when they were asked to proceed as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to Sri Lanka. The government of J.R. Jaywardene was in confrontation with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE). This time a good beginning was made. The Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) appointed the GOC-in-C Southern Command, Lieutenant General Depinder Singh as the Overall Force Commander (OFC). Component Commanders from the three wings were subordinated to him with command of operational forces delegated from the Eastern Naval Command and the Southern Air Command respectively. A formal Directive was issued to the OFC to undertake the ordered missions in Sri Lanka. It appeared that the Indian military hierarchy had finally come of age; alas this proved too good to be true. In less than a month from the time that IPKF moved into Sri Lanka, the situation was turned on its head. The Navy and IAF Cs-in-C, responsible for providing forces, declined to delegate command and forced their superiors in New Delhi, i.e., the Chiefs, to get the component commanders designated as Liaison Officers with no role other than to act as go-betweens between the headquarters of the OFC and of the Cs-in-C. Relatively junior officers were appointed to do this work, further diluting the authority and accountability of the OFC. The COSC, with no dedicated head, was, itself, shown up as a weak structure, with its own internal rifts and dissension and incapable of enforcing its will. The IPKF grew from one division in 1987 to four by 1989, but it was never one force under one command, as originally contemplated. The OFC lost credibility and was, in effect, just the commander of the land forces with the other two wings cooperating, but independently. There were numerous other areas of discord which need not be elaborated here. Apart from the political infirmities of the intervention, poor command and control must rate as the most important military failure of Operation Pawan.

KARGIL IN 1999

India went to war yet again in 1999, fighting to regain the hill positions in the Kargil sector of Jammu and Kashmir, taken over by Pakistan by subterfuge. It was essentially a land battle in which some air power was used to soften enemy positions. The Navy, somewhat exaggeratedly, decided to concentrate its entire strength on the western seaboard (such deployments do not come without great cost), signaling a degree of belligerence not visible in the political posture. It took two months for the Indian forces to regain the heights after Pakistan was forced to withdraw, partly through American pressure.

The war might have taken much longer had this not happened. There are now enough revelations to show the mismatches between the highest military leadership. The Air Force was not prepared to provide the helicopters that the Indian Army requested. The Army, for its part, was reluctant to share full details of what had actually happened. When the Army sought air strikes, the Air Chief, quite correctly, demurred on the logic that this required political approval. In short, once again we were stumbling into action without a synergized plan. If former IAF Chief A.Y. Tipnis is to be believed, matters had reached such a state that the then Army Chief, General V.P. Malik, angrily walked out of a COSC meeting muttering that he would handle things by himself. While some stress and strain in relationships are inherent in any tense environment, these probably exceeded the norm.

What, however, differentiated this conflict from the others was the fact that for the first time in five decades the government constituted a high powered commission to look at the obvious infirmities in the management of national security. The Kargil Review Committee (KRC) came up with a comprehensive report highlighting numerous weaknesses including an inadequately responsive structure for higher defence management. The government formed a Group of Ministers (GOM) which, in turn, constituted four Task Forces comprising persons of experience and knowledge to examine the areas of weakness identified by the KRC. These groups did their work with alacrity, produced reports within four months and in less than a year from its constitution the GOM had made several far reaching recommendations. Those relating to higher management of defence were the most comprehensive and, all save one, were approved. Unfortunately, the most important of them, crucial to the functioning of the armed forces, viz., creation of a dedicated Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) as the principal military adviser, was held in abeyance and continues to remain so.

WHY OUR MILITARY OPERATES THE WAY IT DOES

The historical dimension of the functioning of India's Armed Forces has been discussed above. There are some other factors which have contributed to the military's mindset. First, almost all conflicts that India has fought, have been essentially land wars in which the Army has been the predominant player. The threats faced by the country have been focused across the border. Insurgency and low intensity conflict have also been in its domain. In fact, while the air and naval forces have found it possible to have long periods of peace interspersed with a few weeks of war, the Army has been continuously engaged, either in military conflict or in low intensity operations. There is, therefore, the feeling,

not unreasonable, that it is the main, if not the only, armed force. Second, its size itself creates a feeling of self importance and as a consequence, a defensive mindset in the others. Third, the Air Force, traditionally seen only as a supporting arm, has consistently sought an independent stature, partly by refusing to get conjoined with the others, principally the Army and partly by stressing the strategic role of air power. The Indian Navy has a more fortunate position, operating as it does in a domain in which others can play only supporting roles. Finally, the Armed Forces, themselves, are quite happy with the existing arrangements in which each Chief operates and develops his own Service almost autonomously without any involvement with the others. The political leadership has found it expedient not to disturb this unsatisfactory broth.

At this stage, it might be useful to consider how the Indian military operates. The three Service Chiefs, despite having been converted from Commanders-in-Chief of their respective wings into Chiefs of Staff in 1955, continue to act in their former roles and are, therefore, responsible for conduct of operations. They do this by issuing directives to their respective commanders; for example, in the Navy, these are the Western and Eastern Naval Commands which, in turn, give out orders to their subordinate operational commanders and task forces. Where any assistance is required from another wing, say air support from the Air Force, this has to be arranged through the Maritime Air Operations (MAO) authority in Mumbai, an Air Force institution, acting as the link. The MAO interacts with the appropriate Air Force Command headquarters which, in turn, issues instructions to the IAF station holding the relevant air assets. Often, Air Headquarters itself may have to be approached. The arrangement is about the same as far as the Army is concerned. All operational Army Commands have Air Force elements attached to them, not as subordinates but as advisers. They, in turn, interact with their own superiors to arrange the desired support through Air Force stations. In brief, the inter-Service interaction is through several tiers, both laterally and vertically. The desired air support might not be provided, possibly for good reason and even if it is, may not be in the form and strength requisitioned. Thus, the person responsible for execution of a task does not have control over all the forces that are deployed; on the other hand, the authority providing supporting forces is not responsible for successful achievement of the operation. The shortcomings of this system are readily apparent.

But the situation has begun to change. Most significant to modern day warfare is the recognition of the dominant role that air power must play in any military environment. On land or at sea, control of the air space in the operating area is essential to the successful conduct of battle. Whether provided by shore based aircraft or from those launched

by aircraft carriers at sea, air power has become a determining factor. While it cannot replace boots on ground, its impact on warfare has become overwhelming. This, in turn, has, greatly diminished some of the sensitivities that prevailed earlier. The second major change is in the increasing dimension of concerns at sea. The sustained growth of economy, a key national interest, requires security of overseas trade and energy, both almost entirely seaborne, and safety of sea lanes and offshore assets has, therefore, assumed much more importance even as threats on the land borders are diminishing. The ability of seagoing forces to impact the war on land has also increased. For example, facilities on the coast as well as in the hinterland of the adversary, can, often, be better attacked from the sea than from land or air bases. Cruise missiles of longer range, which could be in our inventory in the next ten years, will further enhance this capability. Finally, no expeditionary or out of area activity can be carried out without the closest possible synergy amongst the three wings of the military.

Along with these operational imperatives, military hardware has also become extremely costly and it is essential that its induction should follow critical analyses of inter se priorities and cost benefit considerations which is possible only under an integrated planning system. For all these reasons, it has become even more important that plans of the three Services are developed and then executed in an integrated fashion and under one common superior. This is not to suggest that there will not be glitches even if changes are made in the way we do things; some of them might even be damaging in their effect, but overall, the likelihood of their occurrence will be much less and the ability of the organization to respond to them effectively, much greater.

THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR EXPERIENCE

That the need for change has been recognized, albeit slowly, is visible in some recent developments. The transformation in the command structure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is an example. This organization started with a miniscule Resident Naval Officer (RNO) from which it grew into that of a Naval Officer in Charge (NOIC) and then into a more elevated and robust Fortress Commander (FORTAN) of the rank of Vice Admiral. The Fortress Command was sought to be given an integrated profile with the positioning of a Brigade Headquarters with two battalions under its direct operational control. However, the Air Force declined to follow suit and its forces at Car Nicobar continued to operate under the orders of the AOC-in-C Southern Air Command stationed in Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala. Under this utterly archaic arrangement not a single sortie of even one helicopter could be ordered

by the FORTAN! Thus, such integration as was there took on a largely cosmetic content with personal relationships being the determining factor; nevertheless, this was still something beyond what obtained on the mainland. This half-baked arrangement continued until 2001 when, based on the GOM recommendations, this structure was finally converted into an integrated theatre command. The C-in-C Andaman and Nicobar, thus, became the first Unified Commander in the Indian Armed Forces with all three wings and the Coast Guard under his direct command. This marked a breakthrough in a system which had not seen any change in the fifty years that had elapsed since Lord Ismay. The integrated structure went through an initial period of acclimatization with occasional hiccups; the fact that it is subordinate to the triumvirate COSC with infirmities of its own and not to one superior adds to the difficulties. Nevertheless, the new integrated command was soon tested in the Tsunami disaster of 2004 when it proved itself by contributing substantially to the efficient conduct of the large scale rescue and relief operations based on synergized planning and execution under a single accountable authority.

QUO VADIS

So, where do we go from here? A second unified and integrated military command entity, the Strategic Forces Command, also under the COSC, was instituted at the same time as the structure in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It does not, at present, have forces under operational control -- these will come later -- but has responsibility and accountability for the strategic domain. These are positive developments. At present, in addition to these two integrated commands, the Army and the Air Force have seven Commands each, while the Navy has three. The Navy's Western Command, responsible for the entire western seaboard, has to interact with two Commands of the Air Force, Southern and South Western and two of the Army. The same is the case on the eastern seaboard. Similarly, the Southern Command of the Army must interact with the Southern as well as South West Commands of the Air Force.

The structure, as can be easily imagined, is not only cumbersome and inefficient but also wasteful in resources. Training, maintenance and logistics continue to be individual Service functions. Looked at dispassionately, there is just no reason why these functions cannot be combined in dedicated Commands with components covering all three wings. Operationally, there could be four to six theatre commands structured geographically; within them, unified commanders could be appointed for specific operations whenever these become necessary. Other integrated Commands for Space, Special Forces, Logistics, Training and Maintenance can also be put in place. The existing Commands could

then be reduced from 17, as at present (excluding the two new Commands mentioned earlier), to no more than a dozen bringing about significant reduction in manpower while providing greater efficiency and accountability. Various models can be worked out but, in principle, unified and integrated functioning must be their theme. This restructuring will also enable the Indian military to become lean and mean; its present teeth-to-tail ratio is, possibly, the worst amongst all armed forces of substance.

It is not that this kind of restructuring was not examined by the GOM when they made their recommendations for the better management of defence. It considered that integration should be achieved progressively and provided, initially, for two such institutions. At the same time, it recommended the creation of a CDS who would act as the principal military adviser to the government and, apart from acting as the direct superior of the two new integrated commands, would also oversee force development in the armed forces. These arrangements were to be reviewed after five years in 2005 when further changes could be made leading to greater integration in the higher direction of military affairs. Unfortunately, the political leadership of that time accepted the need for an Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) but balked at appointing a CDS, thus leaving the former without a head, and that of today has not found it necessary to order a review. It is necessary that the exercise be updated and more changes made. Sooner rather than later, India must have a CDS and integrated theatre commands and given the existing realities, this CDS, in the next five or six years, must be from the Army. In time, the system will settle allowing higher Commanders from all three Services to be eligible for the post.

There are some who argue that change must come from below. This is a fallacy. In every country where management of defence has undergone change, direction has come from the top, always from the political leadership, and despite great opposition from the military leadership. Of all systems, the armed forces are traditionally the most resistant to change which will, inevitably, impinge upon their established work patterns and turfs. In the USA, changes have been legislatively mandated which gives them greater meaning and provide no latitude for dilution. Some countries have taken the executive route. The former is preferable but given the Indian environment the latter might be more practicable.

CONCLUSION

Six decades after Lord Ismay put the higher Indian military structure in place, its contours have become frayed and its logic and rationale questionable, given the changed nature of warfare. The needs of today, much less of the future, cannot be met by the lethargic and unwieldy mechanisms that are in place. We are already well behind in adapting to these changes. Cooperation achieved through personal relations and friendship, facilitated by training together in joint colleges and academies, is a good thing but it can never be a substitute for well structured and formal institutions. It will not be able to stand the stresses and strains of modern military conflict. Wisdom lies in recognizing this truth and creating a system which will be better suited to cope with the new environment. It is time for the political leadership to look at the relevant issues critically and boldly. Until now, it has tended to avoid dealing with issues which would ruffle military feathers; consequently, sticking to the status quo has been the preferred approach. There is a sense that this hesitancy might also be due to the fear that a CDS could become too powerful an entity and that a weak COSC, beset by its own parochialism, is less threatening. Such fears, if they are there, are misplaced. India is now too strong a democracy to succumb to military adventurism; even the armed forces will not accept it.

In short, the time has come to take the bull by the horns. For this, it will be necessary to reconvene a fresh GOM, served by a group of experts, and move further down the road already taken. The Indian military of the 21st century must be equipped to cope with the challenges with which it is likely to be confronted, not only with hardware and manpower of the desired quantity and quality but equally with structures which will exploit these capabilities in the most efficient and economical way. Integrated force development along with operations under unified command, is the way forward. That is the real meaning of jointness, not what passes for it today.□