

## Tri-service integration or consolidation?



While India aspires to jointmanship (conducting integrated military operations with a common strategy, methodology) among the three services, statements over the last few weeks point disturbingly to renewed inter-service rivalry to protect their turf.

Cautioning against the duplication of assets by the three services, Vice-Chief of Air Staff Air Marshal said that jointmanship among the services was not just about joint operations but also about the optimal use of resources.

“Ours is a growing country and our budget is limited. We cannot afford duplicating capabilities. We cannot have an Air Force with the Army, an Air Force with the Navy and another Air Force,” said Air Marshal in one recent seminar.

His comments are significant against the backdrop of the government sanctioning six AH-64 Apache helicopters for the Army, something the service has been seeking for a while. At the same time the Navy is expanding its fighter strength though the carriers to operate them would accommodate less. In addition, Army Chief General recently called for the primacy of the Army in a tri-service environment.

### **Introduction:**

An expert committee appointed by the Defence Ministry recommended steps to enhance the combat potential of the armed forces and to re-balance defence expenditure, submitted its report in January.

The committee, which was headed by Lt General DB Shekatkar (retd) has recommended the creation of three integrated theatre commands — northern for the China border, western for the Pakistan border and southern for the maritime role — instead of the 17 in place currently.

### **What is an integrated theatre command?**

An integrated theatre command envisages a unified command of the three Services, under a single commander, for geographical locations that are of security concern.

- The commander of such a force will be able to bring to bear all resources at his disposal — from the IAF, the Army and the Navy — with seamless efficacy.
- The integrated theatre commander will not be answerable to individual Services, and will be free to train, equip and exercise his command to make it a cohesive fighting force capable of achieving designated goals.

- The logistic resources required to support his operations will also be placed at the disposal of the theatre commander so that he does not have to look for anything when operations are on-going.

This is in contrast to the model of service-specific commands which India currently has, wherein the Army, Air Force and Navy all have their own commands all over the country. In case of war, each Service Chief is expected to control the operations of his Service through individual commands, while they operate jointly.

### **Does India have an integrated theatre command anywhere in its area?**

India has only one integrated theatre command, which is the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC).

- It was formed in 2001, following the Group of Ministers' report on national security, after the Kargil War.
- It is a very small command, with limited resources, and there has been a demand to revert the control of command permanently to the Navy.

The other tri-service command, **the Strategic Forces Command (SFC)**, looks after the delivery and operational control of the country's nuclear assets.

- It was created in 2003, but because it has no specific geographic responsibility and a designated role, it is not an integrated theatre command but an integrated functional command.
- There has been a demand for other integrated functional commands, such as the cyber, aerospace and Special Operations commands, but the government is yet to approve any.

### **But how is “jointness” among services different from integrated commands?**

Jointness means that while the 3 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.

Integrated commands, on the other hand, seek 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.

### **Army wants its supremacy in a joint services environment**

Army Chief General gave a glimpse into his idea of tri-service integration when he said that the “supremacy and primacy of the Army in a joint services environment” should be maintained.

The question which arises is, will these developments unleash another round of inter-service turf war and further delay several important decisions on tri-service integration such as the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), specialised commands for cyber, space and Special Forces?

The comments also come shortly after the Union Cabinet had cleared 65 of 99 recommendations, all related to the Army, of the Lt General D.B. Shekatkar Committee for enhancing combat capability and rebalancing defence expenditure of the armed forces to increase the teeth-to-tail ratio (that is, ratio of combatants to soldiers in support roles).

The remaining 34 recommendations pertaining to the tri-services, in addition to the Navy and Air Force, are to be taken up soon. Among them is a proposal on the appointment of a single point military adviser to the Prime Minister on strategic issues.

### **Need for Chief of Defence Staff**

The last time India fought a major battle was the Kargil conflict in 1999 in which the Navy played a silent role while the Army and Air Force collaborated to expel intruders from Indian soil.

The lessons learnt then prompted the K. Subrahmanyam Committee to propose having a CDS for the first time. But with the latest comments, it appears that the other services would oppose the proposal for a CDS tooth and nail.

India has traditionally been a land power because the primary threats are still on land, from the northern and western borders. But the threat matrix has changed since 1947 and the Indian Ocean region is fast metamorphosing into a major arena of friction, with increasing forays by the Chinese Navy and building up of regional navies with help from China.

Also, while the threat of war stills exists in the subcontinent under the nuclear overhang, the room for large conventional manoeuvres is over. In a conflict situation, what would unfold are short and swift skirmishes which call for agility and swift action by the three services in harmony.

### **Way forward**

After much deliberation, the consensus has turned towards a Permanent Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC), a four star officer equivalent to the three service chiefs, while ideally what the country needs is a full-fledged five star officer. The four star officer would serve no real purpose except adding to the already existing protocol nightmare and complicating the situation further.

The Defence Ministry is yet to form a view on the subject. But experience from the US, Russia and China shows that the decision to create integrated theatre commands will have to be a political one, which will then be executed by the defence services.

A precursor to the creation of integrated theatre commands has to be the appointment of a Chief of Defence Staff or Permanent Chairman, COSC. This was first proposed by the GoM in 2001, but hasn't been implemented so far. Even the last Combined Commanders Conference at Dehradun in February, chaired by the Prime Minister, was inconclusive on the subject, with a consensus on taking the proposal forward.

The recently released 'Joint military doctrine of the Indian armed forces 2017' made the right noise on "jointness" and "integration", but much work is needed on the ground to achieve desired goal.