

Articles

Vinod Patney*

Does Higher Defence Organisation in India Require a Major Surgery?

Abstract

Amendments and/or modifications in the Higher Defence Organisations of our country are a subject of constant debate. Many and diverse views continue to be aired. The common denominator seems to be a general dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs. The need to improve on the existing templates is a laudable thought but the burning question is: 'Do we require major surgery?' Also, must we be taken in by examples of systems that have obtained in other countries or should we only seek solutions that are more appropriate to our circumstances? Should we blindly ape what others do or employ our own genius in fashioning systems that are more applicable to our needs? What are the changes that could be introduced to advantage? This article addresses these questions and a few more. The views expressed are personal and not parochial but they are, possibly and naturally, based on the experiences of the author after a lifetime of service in our Air Force.

The Debate

Before any form of surgery, major or otherwise to our defense organisation is countenanced, it behoves us to diagnose what ails the system. We have won all the wars we have fought/ had to fight, less the 1962 conflict, and that should in itself be sufficient to show that our organisation is not too bad, and works almost every time. If a military organization is established primarily to prepare the armed forces to win wars, our system has stood the test of time. In 1962, our problem was a lack of proper intelligence, a lack of adequate preparation and we were surprised by an unexpected Chinese attack. Possibly, we were also a little unsure as to how to wage that type of war. Be that as it may, the point must

* **The author** is Air Marshal (Retd.) of the Indian Air Force, and currently the Director General of the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), New Delhi.

be made that, given the circumstances; no different higher defense organization could have turned that defeat into victory. Thus the results of the wars that we have fought do not make a case for a major change/ surgery in our organization.

Undoubtedly, there are ills in our system that should be addressed. Our procurement system is slow and laboured. 'Jointness', i.e. cross-service cooperation in all the stages of the military processes amongst our services could be better. Also the relations between and the mutual confidence of the services on one hand and the Ministry of Defence on the other should improve. Regrettably, one possible cause for the current state of affairs is inadequate understanding of the other(s) point of view and maybe even some amount of suspicion of intentions. The solutions to bring about improvements in such a scenario stare us in the face. We need a greater understanding and tolerance as well as appreciation of differing viewpoints. We must never ever forget, even momentarily, that we are on the same side. To my mind, this is more of a mental challenge, rather than an organizational limitation. We can, by mere intent, make the system work much better. That is what we should do.

The ongoing debate on higher defence management largely deals with three issues, namely:

- Need for the armed forces to become part of the government and active players in decision making. Also, for greater understanding to develop, armed forces officers should occupy berths in the civilian hierarchy and vice versa. This should be done at both middle and senior levels.
- Need for a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) or a Permanent Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (PCCOSC). What should be his duties and responsibilities?
- Should we adopt the Theatre Command system?

The three issues require careful, individual examination.

Civil/Military Interaction

The proposals regarding cross postings appear attractive and seem to bear a lot of merit. These proposals can promote better understanding as long as there is a mutual desire to cooperate and personal differences of varying personalities do not undermine the system. Also, there is a need to be selective in determining the berths that the deputationists could occupy. More importantly, it does not seem desirable for those posted from outside the system to be given decision making responsibilities. They would lack the basic knowledge and instinctive understanding of systems in vogue. The best we could hope for is that they would in fact be able to provide in-house domain knowledge. That will be of

benefit unless the advice rendered is only subjective. That could happen. Again, the deputationists may find the work culture somewhat alien and will have to get used to a new work ethos on joining the new organization and then once again when they revert back to their parent service.

One other drawback is that as the deputationists will have to revert to their parent service, they may elect to air only parochial views. The proposal to introduce deputationists has its limitations but the advantage of ready availability of professional advice has considerable value and should be encouraged and the personnel warned of the many pitfalls and even guided to overcome them. The great plus point of the proposal is that it can be readily implemented without introducing any major changes and the system can be easily modified or even abandoned at will. Another thought that could be considered is that where independent advice from more experienced officers is needed, it may be advisable to elicit the help of recently retired senior officers whose knowledge is still fresh and who may not always agree with the views of their parent service.

The other issue is the advisability of making service officers a part of the government and giving them decision making responsibilities that are traditionally enjoyed by the civil servants. The thought process behind the proposal is that service officers with their professional knowledge will better understand the needs and thereby hasten the decision making process particularly in procurement of hardware. Here three issues merit examination. Firstly, supposed inefficiencies cannot be cured by mere change from civilian officers to service officers manning the berths in the Ministry of Defence. There is a system in vogue that is tried and tested and whilst improving on it must remain an ongoing process, major changes could prove to be counterproductive. Secondly and quite importantly, the essential requirement is training for the post and continuity in the post and not who mans it. It is recommended that a high percentage of civil servants in the Ministry of Defence should have had sufficient exposure to the armed forces either when they join, say by spending a year or two in armed force units, or whilst in service. This will foster greater understanding of service systems and requirements. Thirdly and maybe the most importantly, conscious efforts should be made to better understand the other side of the picture to foster a firm belief that all are on the same side but working in individual ways towards a common goal. The tendency that should be eschewed is the belief/conviction that appointment to a post makes for instant expertise. Seeking advice and understanding is neither demeaning nor a sin.

For better interaction of service and civil functionaries, major changes in organisation are unwarranted. Incremental improvements should be a continuous

process. However it must be emphasized that all should recognize that an organisation cannot function better than the capabilities of the people manning it.

CDS/PCCOSC

For the rest of this article, the terms CDS and PCCOSC are used interchangeably and imply that both designations will carry similar responsibilities. The CDS will be supported by the existing Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and the extant duties of IDS will devolve on the CDS. The writings on the duties of CDS refer broadly to the following responsibilities:

- This position will be the single point of contact for military advice or on matters military.
- Administering the Strategic Force Command (SFC). Whenever other tri-service commands like Special Operations Command, Cyber Command or Space Command are set up, the Commanders of all these Commands will report to the CDS.
- The CDS and his/her staff will ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness in the planning process. This should include both procurements and operational planning.
- The CDS will help foster greater jointness amongst the services.

As per existing norms, the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) reports to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and so do the Commander SFC and the tri service Andaman and Nicobar Command. One difference is that unlike in the case of the proposed CDS, the Chairman COSC is not designated as the single point of contact on military matters. The Chairman is also a rotational appointment and rapid changes have occurred in the past, changes that are viewed by some as militating against the minimum desired tenure to permit continuity. However it is argued that the system has been operating for many years and the very experienced Chairman COSC, backed by so many three and two star officers and a considerable staff that comprise IDS, should not have any difficulty to undertake additional responsibilities. Hence it is opined that the current system should be left unchanged for the moment. As and when new tri service commands are established, the institution of a Permanent Chairman makes sense. He would now be required to oversee and control the functioning of the tri service commands to meet the needs of all three services. Chairman COSC may find the workload of overseeing the work of three or four additional commands whilst retaining the responsibilities of his parent service as excessive. Should the task of PCCOSC also include the four responsibilities mentioned above? The paragraphs that follow address this question.

CDS as Single Point Source for Military Advice

On the face of it, seeking professional advice from only a single source on all military issues appears to give the source, inherent super human powers of in depth understanding of all issues concerning the armed forces. This is beyond what can be expected of a mere mortal. The concept is flawed. We are in an age of specialization and super specialization and whilst generalists have their place, it will always be prudent to seek advice from the source best qualified to provide it. This is particularly so in case of operational plans and recommendations. The same holds true for procurement recommendations. Corporate decision making has many advantages. A single individual cannot be the person to be contacted in every case. If a system of single source of advice is adopted, the CDS would often have to seek professional guidance from others. His recommendations would be based on second hand information and if a discussion ensues or supplementary issues arise, the CDS will be hard pressed to make the best views available. It should also be recognised that, in the absence of adequate data, and this is often the case, one has to rely on intuition and intuition can be a successful product only of firsthand experience. There is no substitute for experience.

Be that as it may, it is also more than likely that the views of the CDS would, maybe even unintentionally, be biased. We can and should do better. Each service has its core competencies and that fact should be recognized and accepted by all. Within each service there are sub specialisations and in each case, there will probably be more than one expert. Even the head of a particular service often seeks the views of more than one individual, discusses the pros and cons of differing thoughts before arriving at a plan or a recommended course of action. If this is obtained in a single service environment, the situation is far more complex in inter service considerations.

One more issue merits consideration. The CDS would be from one of the three services and it is inadvisable to make this position solely responsible for the conduct of operations. That should remain in the realm of individual services. This cannot be over emphasised. The CDS would seek views from the heads of the three services and he would be more agreeable and amenable to advice from the heads of services that are not his parent service. However, differences of opinion could arise where his thinking is considerably different from the head of his parent service. An avoidable piquant situation could arise.

So the concept of CDS providing a single point of advice should be considered as 'still born'.

Strategic Forces Command

The Strategic Forces Command draws support from all three services. There is also a need for administrative control of and administrative support to the Command. As it would be somewhat problematic for the Commander SFC to deal with all three heads of the services, his reporting to the Chairman COSC or CDS or PCCOSC stands to reason. However it is a moot point as to whether any form of operational control should be exercised by Chairman COSC. In our system, for very good reasons, we have a clear separation between the control and conduct of conventional operations on one hand and the preparation and, God forbid, for a nuclear war on the other. It is imperative that the separation is maintained. The two are very distinct levels of conflict and must be dealt with separately. We must shun the thought that use of a nuclear weapon is a possible extension of conventional military conflict. In our scenario, the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of such weapons against us. That must remain the cardinal principle.

Again, for good reasons, the security attached to nuclear matters must be of a decidedly higher order and we should do whatever is possible to ensure that the systems we adopt are such that no classified information is even inadvertently compromised. Hence it is strongly recommended that the operational control of Commander SFC should be exercised by either the National Security Adviser or the Executive Council of the National Command Authority. In fact it would be advisable if Commander SFC is invited to become part of the Executive Council.

Efficiency and Effectiveness of the Planning Process

IDS was intended to be the staff of the CDS. Even without the CDS, IDS was to report to the Chairman of the COSC. It is now nearly 16 years since the conception of IDS (Oct 2001). By now all teething problems should have been overcome and the organization should have been well settled to oversee all inter-service issues. Unfortunately, the organisation has morphed into an entity all by itself instead of using the very great expertise posted to it to iron out inter service differences. The greatest contribution that IDS could have made is to find unanimously acceptable solutions to vexing problems. They were to also help find common ground when there were serious differences of opinion. However, this has largely eluded us.

The Defence Intelligence Agency of the IDS has done good work in providing Joint Intelligence Assessments and is now a respected organisation. The IDS has also been successful in finalizing a Defence Space Vision. Many Joint Committees have been created for better functional efficiency. Some air defence

issues have found solutions. A Joint Doctrine for the services has also been released. But, all these were not seriously contentious issues, to begin with. For instance, the doctrine does not carry a high security grading and hence must be guarded in its approach. If a doctrine is defined as a set of beliefs, it has little value in formulating either procurement or operational plans. At best it can lay down broad concepts and basic principles on the conduct of operations. Is a doctrine always implementable? Possibly the answer is in the negative. No doctrine can cater to varied contingences and can never be a dictat on how to wage wars. Security considerations will prohibit that. Again, the release of a Joint Doctrine does not automatically imply that it is a stepping stone to the establishment of the CDS and/or of Theatre Commands. At best finalizing a Joint Doctrine is a small step and, possibly, shows that on issues that do not pertain to procurement or operations, a unanimity of views of the three services can be obtained even if it is time consuming. That seems inadequate.

The major task of IDS should be to fashion and control the procurement system and to formulate operation plans. Over the years the IDS has worked hard to streamline the procurement process. It has introduced checks and procedures to ensure that the Defence Procurement Procedure is adhered to. On many occasions, it has made sure that a common approach and recommendations are presented to the Defence Acquisition Council. Some good work has also been done towards finding commonality in equipment purchases and in making a single approach to the vendors; independent approaches by different services for the same equipment has often happened in the past and should not occur again. All this is good but it is not sufficient.

The IDS does little to formulate the requirements for the services. The Long Term Perspective Plans of Army/Navy/Air Force are worked out by the individual service supposedly on the basis of Net Assessments prepared by the concerned Directorate in IDS and the plan forwarded to the IDS. The IDS merely collates the plans and produces a document titled the Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP). It is intended to be a joint plan on the basis of which purchase proposals can be readied. As it is, the IDS does not examine if the proposals in the individual plans are indeed based on the net assessments. Again, in the integrated plan, there are no recommendations made on prioritisation of purchases. There is little application of mind. Different views are not sought and thereafter examined to arrive at concrete and studied recommendations that can be defended. There is little examination as to whether the purchases sought by different services are conducive to joint operational plans. In this way the authority of the services is not undermined but then the LTIPP can hardly be called a joint plan.

The major limitation in the system followed is that a joint procurement plan cannot be made based on individual appreciations of what the net assessment forecasts. The starting point has to be joint planning. A systematic approach towards this end is needed. It is recommended that each service is tasked to work out, in cogent terms, its capabilities whilst operating on its own and in conjunction with the other service(s). This must be the first step. Thereafter joint planning should be carried out for the contingencies that flow out of the net assessment or any other contingency. Such joint planning should carry the commitment of each service that they will be able to bring into effect what they say they can. That alone can make the planning more meaningful as there will then be an inherent quasi guarantee of success. The implicit understanding should be that, if it becomes necessary to put the plans into practice, no service will step back or make excuses for performance that is short of what was projected earlier as capabilities. Accountability must be ensured. The planning will thus be more realistic.

More importantly, it will be a joint plan and point the way towards training requirements. It is granted that this will be an involved process and a continuous process but the results will be worthwhile. The plans will then automatically throw up immediate procurement needs and prioritisation of procurements in the years ahead. The operational plans and the subsequently arrived at procurement plans will have the concurrence of all three services. If we are to attenuate inter service rivalry, the start should be with operational planning that is based on reality rather than imagined capabilities and requirements. Good jointness will be a byproduct that will strengthen with time. Joint formulation of strategy and tactics and the consequent operational planning cannot but foster better understanding and better jointness.

Some could and do argue that the procedure suggested is much too simplistic and warfare is far more complex. The author wholeheartedly agrees. For security reasons, details have been omitted. Also, as the system is fielded and begins to operate, improvements will suggest themselves. The planning system is an evolutionary process. But it bears mention that everyone accepts that joint planning is a pre-requisite for effective execution of a modern war and progressive modernization is essential. The procedure outlined meets both requirements. A logical approach has been recommended – first plan and then, allow the planning process to decide on procurement priorities. It must be again emphasized that the planning process has to be complex and ongoing and not a one-time activity. Security considerations are likely to arise but as the planning, by itself, is carried out jointly and only the execution of plans are devolved to individual services, the security issue can be easily contained. Again, as there

will probably be many plans and sub plans for each contingency, security is ultimately strengthened as the choice of plan to adopt will be taken at the last moment. A full time planning team is needed and the work of this team will be as important during peace as it will be during war.

The procedure outlined has not been attempted so far and it is likely that it will be met with strong resistance. Possibly a Governmental push may be required. It has often been mooted that a Government push is needed to introduce changes in Higher Defence Organisation. The author argues that a push towards joint planning will work better. Not only is planning for possible wars and how to prosecute them, the bread and butter of the armed forces but the plans generated and the manner in which the wars should be fought will automatically indicate the optimum organisation that will be most suitable to carry out such activities. Such a study will be based on inputs that are more germane to the armed forces and are as realistic as possible, as opposed to expressions of imaginary needs and fears. And maybe no real changes will be required in the end.

When the IDS was created 16 years ago, it was hoped that better inter service cooperation will result. Unfortunately that has not happened. Turf battles continue even within IDS. If 16 years of IDS existence and a manning level of some 300 officers drawn from all three services, headed by an officer of Vice Chief status who is supported by 5 officers of three star PSO status and another 24 two star officers, have still left so many shortcomings as mentioned in the earlier paragraphs, possibly the problem is neither administrative nor organisational. Instilling of jointness may be the only essential requirement not being fulfilled. Is it time to think *de novo*?

Jointness

Innumerable numbers of articles have been written and discussions held on the absence of jointness in the armed forces and the overriding need to instill it. Unfortunately jointness means different things to different people. Remedies abound but jointness has remained elusive. It was thought that with institutions like the National Defence Academy, Defence Services Staff College and the other inter service organisations, greater understanding will occur and jointness will automatically follow. Such optimistic thoughts have been belied. We have been unable to get rid of 'turf wars'. This is in spite of the fact that with joint training institutions greater bonhomie amongst the services has come about but 'jointness' is still a long way off.

There have been occasions when the services have been in agreement and have put up joint recommendations but these relate to essentially administrative issues like pay commission awards and the like.

Our history of conflicts since our Independence shows that the level of cooperation should have been better. A few examples are:

- In the Kashmir War of 1947-48, despite Prime Minister's advice to the Army Chief on the importance of Skardu, his air counterpart was not informed and this delayed the supplies to the besieged and beleaguered garrison. That led to the surrender and consequent massacre of the garrison.
- In 1962, while the Government did not permit use of combat air power which had been deployed and was fully ready for any contingency, the phenomenal and back-breaking effort by the air transport fleet was wasted due to poor selection of dropping zones especially at Longju and Tsangdhar. Their unsuitability was conveyed by the AOC-in-C to the Corps Commander but the former was over-ruled.
- There was little joint planning before and during the 1965 Indo-Pak War. The IAF leadership was not aware of our Army's plan and could not mesh its plan with that of the Army. Possibly, this resulted in the fizzling out of quick advance by the Army in Lahore sector on 6 September 1965. The air effort was available for supporting the land forces but the demands either were not raised or were rejected by the JAAOCs. This resulted in utilisation of aircraft to around one sortie per aircraft per day against a planning figure and availability of 3 sorties/ aircraft/day.
- Jaffna University heli-drop soon after the induction of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) into Sri Lanka in 1987 was a disaster and resulted in very heavy but avoidable casualties mainly due to lack of joint planning. The situation changed remarkably with the setting up of HQ IPKF at Madras and of an Air Force Cell therein.

This is an extremely sad story as one should have expected that we would learn lessons from our mistakes in each of these conflicts and cooperation would improve progressively. Some improvements did take place as in the case of the 1971 conflict and the Kargil conflict, but, largely, an unsatisfactory situation continues to prevail. This is in spite of a 16 year experiment with IDS and the Unified Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC).

Three issues militate against better jointness amongst the services. Firstly, there is a lack of adequate understanding of the operational thinking, strengths and limitations of the other services. This is particularly true in knowledge about the Air Force. The capabilities of the air force are not well known and hence the expectations are not realistic. What makes matters worse is that air power is

inherently difficult to understand. When the air force says that it is unable to perform a task, it is sometimes mistaken for the air force not wanting to do so. It is a historical fact that the air force has always come forward to support the Army or Navy but at times this fact is not appreciated. On the other hand, the ubiquitous nature of air power is appreciated and there is a clamour for an air force under command. This goes against the basic principle in the utilization of air power – unity of command. Jointness will remain elusive unless such cardinal issues are understood.

Secondly, in spite of so many years of seeking ‘jointness’, the roles and missions of individual services have not been defined still and the core competencies have not yet been stipulated. It must be done post haste. This is an essential pre-requisite. Three independent services have been created because they have different attributes and core competencies. In the absence of stipulations of core competencies and defined roles, attempts to encroach into the others’ domain will continue. Such attempts, often without informing the concerned service, would obviously end up creating bad blood. It is akin to poaching on the territory of a sister service. ‘Must guard our turf’ has become a way of life. Once again, it is the Air Force that bears the major brunt of ‘attempted encroachment’. Once the core competencies and roles and missions of each service are well defined and enforced, hopefully by a governmental fiat, ‘attempted encroachments’ should cease. *In the view of the author, a Governmental order stipulating the core competencies and roles and missions of each service is the single most important remedy to bring about jointness.* With better jointness better cooperation and coordination will follow.

Thirdly, by its very nature, air power has a role to play, often a decided role, in all types of operations. As a result it is much in demand. The service that needs air power often does not recognise that the air force capability is finite. It happens that at times the air effort is not available in sufficient quantity. There can be many reasons for this from availability to weather to need for prioritisation of available effort etc. However this is not understood and bad blood is created. Worse, there is a clamour for air power under command. What is not recognised is that if the demands for air assets that another service seeks are made available to the Air Force, better availability and utilization will result as flying operations are without doubt the core competency of the Air Force. With duplication, command and control issues and air space management issues raise their ugly head and give cause to more disagreements.

Possibly a fourth factor is the desire to have all support functions under command. It is but obvious that such an approach is not conducive to enhanced jointness.

Implicit in the four factors described above is the remedy to right the wrongs. One issue that will probably transcend all others to bring about jointness is joint planning. The basis of joint planning has to be the recognition of core competencies and understanding of roles and missions of each service. Again, this factor cannot be reiterated or re-emphasised often enough. Joint planning will also bring to light the availability of resources and an understanding of how and why the dearth of the same should be shared. Besides all this, it is a foregone conclusion that we must fight together. Some 15 years ago the author had opined that *far more important than planning for joint operations is joint planning for operations*. This is not a play on words but an important consideration and factor to be kept in mind if we are to succeed. The author still stands by it and argues that joint planning is the single most important aspect for inter service cooperation. It is possible that in some circumstances, a single service operation is the best option. A single service operation is indeed a valid operation of war as long as it is the result of joint planning. Meaningful and continuous joint planning will thus bring about 'jointness'.

Theatre Commands

There were two occasions in independent India where a Unified Command system was adopted. The first was during the IPKF operations in 1987 (briefly referred to above). In the early days itself, the Army Commander elected to task helicopters for a helicopter drop of Army personnel at Jaffna University. The Air Force element was against it calling it far too risky but was overruled. In the event all helicopters were damaged. More importantly, a number of lives were lost. Almost immediately thereafter, an Air Component Commander was positioned to take charge of deployment and tasking of air assets. The Air Force elements continued to support the operations but under the control of the Air Commander. The Unified Command System was however, a failure and discontinued with.

Andaman and Nicobar Command: The second instance relates to the formation of the Unified Andaman and Nicobar Command. The Command was set up in October 2001. One of the objectives was to establish the viability of a Theatre Command. The functioning over the last 16 years does not give confidence that a Theatre Command system will be of benefit.

The Unified Command has not succeeded in fostering jointness. Reportedly, inter service rivalry is as strong as ever. Personnel of each service have to follow the rules of the parent service even if they are markedly different from the others. Commonality has not been ensured. The authority of the C-in-C is undermined as he can try disciplinary cases only of personnel of his parent service. The

personnel of the other services can be tried by the senior officers of the service in the Command but if the case has to be referred to someone senior, it is so referred to respective Service Head Quarters (HQs). Such a situation is not conducive to good discipline. There is no combined maintenance organisation but each service has their own. A common communication system does not exist. Service HQ, possibly perforce, have to deal with the Component Commanders directly bypassing the HQ of the Command. Land continues to be controlled by the parent service and permission has to be sought from the HQ of the service concerned for any planned utilisation. Besides, permission is seldom granted.

The major lacuna is in the operational arena. The Command has a clearly stipulated task but little means to meet the requirement. The forces deployed are meagre and it is a moot point if augmentation of forces is inadequate, in terms of how many and when they can be expected. The C-in-C does not have enough forces under Command to plan and conduct operational exercises and test the mettle of his personnel. One wonders how the Command will fare in war.

The ANC does not have enough forces under command as more forces are unavailable. Such poverty sharing will be a regular feature if Theatre Commands are introduced. It will be difficult to carry out meaningful training and operational planning in many such commands.

It is recommended that the Unified Command be disbanded and we should revert to the earlier system of placing the forces under the concerned geographical command. In this way the geographical commands will have to just add on to their responsibilities but will have the freedom to work out contingency planning and training schedules as a substantially greater force level will be available. If after 16 years, there are such drawbacks in the functioning of the Command, it behoves us to reconsider the setting up of a Unified ANC and to seek other solutions.

Need for Theatre Commands: An organization or proposed organisation should be based on perceived needs. It is generally accepted that whilst we must prepare for a major war to create a deterrent capability, the types of conflicts in the near future are likely to be of short duration or even near continuous, event based, low level, sub-conventional operations. For such operations, a mammoth organisation like a Theatre Command is a gross overkill.

Conventional wisdom also suggests that if a major war were to break out it would be sharp, intense and last for a maximum of 15 days or so. In wars like this, air power will have a defining role. Such wars will demand concentration of air power at different locations at different times for different roles. The radii

of action of modern day aircraft can be as high as 1500-2000 kms or more. This implies the ability and maybe the need, to hit targets at long distances rapidly and repeatedly including the ability to hit targets in the operational area of responsibility of more than one Command. The aircraft may have to, probably will have to, transcend the geographical limits of other Commands. Deployment of aircraft may have to be changed repeatedly, from one sector to another, depending on the progress of operations. History records how all this and more was done in previous conflicts, even when our capability was nowhere near as good as it is today. The situation becomes more complex if we add the actions carried out by the adversary. Air Defence and offensive operations have to be conducted with effective synergy. All this must lead to the conclusion that air operations are markedly different from that of the other two services in terms of expanse of areas of interest and rapidity with which operations can be mounted. Strategic agility is a by word of air power. Unity of Command with devolution of control is an essential characteristic for effective use of air power and must be respected.

The above paragraph should not give the impression that the air force will fight its own war. Far from it!! It is again emphasised that joint planning is the name of the game. The Joint Plan will include the aforementioned tasks for the air force but not preclude other tasks. A Theatre Command system will introduce one more level in the control of air power and place a spanner in the work of air power, arguably the work of the service that will have most to offer. Most importantly, piecemeal use of air power has never yielded good results. This is particularly true when the forces available are few. There have been occasions in the past when control and tasking of particular aircraft in short supply was carried out directly by Air HQ. There can be other reasons also where Air HQ will elect to exercise direct control over designated forces.

The underlying conclusion therefore, must be that a Theatre Command system will serve no useful purpose but would only impede the capability and potential of air power.

Conclusion

The author sees no justification in introducing either a CDS or Theatre Command system. Indeed, his argument is that it is contra-indicated. The essential need is for a better joint planning that may have to be enforced by the Government. At the same time the cardinal requirement of the hour is that the Government must take it upon itself to stipulate the core competencies as well as the roles and missions of the three services.

There are so many issues demanding the Armed Forces and the Government's attention. The need for modernisation is urgent and so is the requirement for clear cut policies on space, cyber space, special forces etc. These are significantly consequential issues that should proceed at an accelerated speed. Unnecessary impediments in the form of rhetorical discussions on CDS/Theatre Commands should be put to rest once and for all. We simply need a few improvements and refinements in our Higher Defence Organisation, not a major surgical intervention.