

The problem now with the military synergy plan

The Indian military must note that consultative strategising is a prerequisite before a concrete structure is put in place



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It is indisputable that the Indian military continues to work in silos, like all governmental agencies in India, and a need was rightly felt and directions issued by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to bring about jointness, leaving the task to the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) of India.

It is also indisputable that the aim is to bring about a synergy in operations while economising through the elimination of duplication and wasteful practices or processes.

At the outset, it also needs to be clearly stated that, contrary to the recent media reports, debates and some opinions, the Indian Air Force (IAF) is not playing ‘dog in the manger’ and resisting the formation of theatre/functional commands. With my 40 years in uniform, as I understand the doctrine and philosophy of the IAF, it is keen to bring in the requisite reforms to improve the war-fighting capabilities of the Indian military as a whole while also economising.

Nuances of air power

The statement that the IAF wants to fight its own private war thus comes from people who do not understand the nuances and capabilities of air power and lack the expertise in its effective utilisation. In the current formulation of theatres, the objections from the IAF have essentially been due to air power being seen as an adjunct to the two surface forces, the Indian Army and the Indian Navy, and being divided into penny packets which would seriously de-

grade the effectiveness of air operations in any future conflict or contingency. It is better that such objections and dissenting opinions come out now before the structure is formalised than once it is set in stone and the use of air power is found to be sub-optimal under the military ethos of “an order is an order”. We must remember that in war there is no prize for the runner-up. The nation would then end up paying a heavy price, with the Air Force carrying the burden and blame for the failures.

Political objectives

If war is the continuation of politics by other means, then it is essential to first define the political objectives flowing into a national security strategy before any effective use of force can be truly contemplated. **The failures of the mightiest militaries in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and even our own Indian misadventure in Sri Lanka bear testimony to the lack of clear political objectives and appropriate military strategies.**

It is, therefore, unfortunate that even after over seven decades after Independence, **India still does not have a clearly articulated national security strategy. Only such a strategy can define the types of contingencies the military is expected to address, leading to appropriate military strategies, doctrines and required capabilities.**

That would define the structures required for the conduct of synergised operations with the requisite communications and training requirements. Concurrently, such an intellectual exercise would identify duplication, wasteful resources and practices. This is what the CDS should have been pursuing before first freezing the structure and then trying to glue the pieces together or hammer square pegs in round holes.

As argued elsewhere earlier,



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such an exercise may well result in identifying air power as the lead element, particularly since the Indian political aim, even in the foreseeable future, is unlikely to be occupation of new territories. A large, manpower-intensive army with unusable armour formations would then also come into focus. Even the proposed air defence command conflicts with the domain commands in seamless employment of air power. It is due to the absence of such an intellectual exercise that the IAF does not wish to see its limited resources frittered away in fighting frontal defensive battles by a land force commander with little expertise in employment of air power. **The Army fails to realise that offensive air power is best not seen, busy keeping the enemy air force pinned down elsewhere while giving own surface forces the freedom to manoeuvre and operate with impunity, as shown in 1971.**

The Army-Air Force silo

Historically, the Indian Army has always kept the IAF out of the information loop and demonstrated a penchant to ‘go it alone’. The charge that the IAF joined the party late during Kargil (1999) is also totally baseless and shows a lack of knowledge of events and a failure to learn from historical facts. Recorded facts and a dispassionate view would clearly show that the IAF began conducting reconnaissance missions on May 10 as soon

as the Indian Army just made a request for attack helicopters, without sharing full information. It is also surprising that a request for photo-reconnaissance of the entire area was not made to first gather essential intelligence on what the Army was facing, before launching foot patrols which were mostly ambushed with unnecessary casualties, instead of asking for armed helicopters. This despite the IAF pointing out the unsuitability of armed helicopters at these altitudes and their vulnerability.

The use of offensive air power close to the Line of Control also required that the political leadership be kept informed due to possibilities of escalation, something that the Army was unwilling to do. Even the Chief of Army Staff (CoAS) initially threatened to go it alone on his return from his visit abroad. As for silos, the CoAS himself admitted later that information was not shared even between the Director General of Military Operation (DGMO) and the Director General of Military Intelligence (DGMI) within Army headquarters, much less with the IAF. All this was despite the fact that the Defence Programme post-1962 was based on the assumption that China posed the major threat and that the IAF be made capable of assuming some of the Army’s deterrence capability.

Echoes from Kargil

Seen in this light, **the Chinese incursion into Eastern Ladakh last year is reminiscent of Kargil. While the response has been swift, it is evident that a clear intent to use combat air power, as against 1962, has significantly contributed in deterring China.** However, such intent and a joint strategy would have been forcefully signalled by the presence of air force representatives in the ongoing negotiations

to restore *status quo ante*. The continuing build-up of the infrastructure for the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in Tibet further emphasises the need for an air-land strategy, with air power as the lead element to deter or defeat the Chinese designs at coercion.

Address the structural gaps

Finally, theatre or any lower structure requires an institutionalised higher defence organisation, which has been sadly missing since the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC) became defunct in the 1950s, leading to little regular dialogue between the political and military leadership, except in crises resulting in knee-jerk responses. This led to a remark from a scholar-warrior that, “it is ironic that the Cabinet has an Accommodation Committee but not a Defence Committee”. **In the current proposal, it appears that the CDS, as the permanent chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CoSC), would also exercise operational control of the theatre/functional commands, a move that is unlikely to be palatable to the politico-bureaucratic leadership and which has, perhaps, called for further deliberations.**

Prudence demands that instead of ramming down such structures without adequate deliberations and discussions with all stakeholders, we first evolve appropriate military strategies in a nuclear backdrop in concert with the political objectives. Thereafter, joint planning and training for all foreseen contingencies, with war-gaming, would automatically indicate the required structures with suitable command, control and communications.

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