

# Integrated Theatre Command: Strategic Synergy Between the Armed Forces of India

Vinayagamurugan P

Assistant, State Election Commission, Puducherry

## Abstract

The changing dynamics of the modern warfare, advancement of critical and emerging technology, changing geopolitical scenario and political instability in the neighboring countries, for example, the situations in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Further, the evolving multidimensional security challenges from multiple fronts such as the border dispute with Pakistan and China, standoffs in India-China borders, presence of Chinese Navy in the Indian Ocean Region, Geo-Political influence of China in Maldives's Government and Sri Lankan Government are posing significant threat to the India's National Security, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity. To address these security challenges and potential threat from multiple fronts such as Land, Air, Surface water, Underwater, Space and Cyber, an integrated approach is needed for effectively countering the multidimensional security challenges emerging from multiple fronts in multi domains. Therefore, an integration of armed forces and strategic synergy between the armed forces of India is paramount important for India's National Security and Interest. This gives special impetus towards the creation of an Integrated Theatre Command in India. Further, an integrated Theatre Command is crucial for tackling the multidimensional defence challenges in future.

**Keyword:** Integrated Theatre Command, Tri-Service Command, Inter-Services Organisations, Strategic Synergy, Joint Services Command, Chief of Defence Staff.

## Introduction

India is a most populous country and largest democracy in the world. Further, securing the India's vast maritime boundary and land borders with diverse geographical features is challenging and difficult task. However, it is emphasized that the Indian Armed Forces is already operating in these adverse climatic and geographical conditions. Currently, India is having a longstanding border dispute with China and also facing challenges from territorial claim by China in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh regions of India. Further, the Galwan clash, Doklam standoff, Depsang standoff and Pangong lake dispute are also considered as a matter of concern for protecting India's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity. In addition, India is also having a border dispute with Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan induced cross border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, terror financing and harboring terrorist for proxy wars are major threat to the peace and stability in the India-Pakistan border regions. And, China's growing naval presence and influence in the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific Region, including the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti. Further, the Chinese acquisition of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and Chinese controlled deep water sea port in Gwadar, Pakistan are also posing strategic challenges to the India's Maritime security and Interest. Consequently, these strategic and security challenges from multiple fronts necessitates the

Integrated Theatre Command and strategic synergy between the armed forces for tactically countering the emerging defence challenges.

**Integrated Theatre Command**

An Integrated Theatre Command is a military reform unifying the personnel and resources of the three service of the armed forces (Indian Army, Indian Navy and Indian Air Force) for conducting joint operations in a specific geographical area (theatre), during wars or conflicts under a single unified command structure towards operational effectiveness, resource optimization, better coordination, strategic synergy and faster decision making on the battlefield or war or conflicts. In military term, a ‘theatre’ refers to a specific geographic area (land, air and sea) that could potentially become a conflict zone.

**Current Command Structure of Armed Forces in India**

Currently, India is having 17 single service commands comprising of Indian Army (7 commands), Indian Air Force (7 commands) and Indian Navy (3 commands). In addition, India is also having 2 Tri-Service commands such as Andaman and Nicobar Command and Strategic Force Command.

**Table 1: Current Command Structure of Armed Forces in India**

<b>Command Structure of Armed Forces in India (17 single service commands)</b>		
<b>Indian Army (7 commands)</b>	<b>Indian Air Force (7 commands)</b>	<b>Indian Navy (3 commands)</b>
Northern Command (Head Quarters at Udhampur)	Central Air Command (Head Quarters at Prayagraj)	Western Naval Command (Head Quarters at Mumbai)
Wester Command (Head Quarters at Chandigarh)	Eastern Air Command (Head Quarters at Shillong)	
Eastern Command (Head Quarters at Kolkata)	Western Air Command (Head Quarters at Delhi)	
Southern Command (Head Quarters at Pune)	Southern Air Command (Head Quarters at Thiruvananthapuram)	Eastern Naval Command (Head Quarters at Visakhapatnam)
South Western Command (Head Quarters at Jaipur)	South Western Air Command (Head Quarters at Gandhi Nagar)	
Central Command (Head Quarters at Lucknow)	Air Force Training Command (Head Quarters at Bangalore)	Southern Naval Command (Head Quarters at Kochi)
Army Training Command (ARTRAC) (Head Quarters at Shimla)	Maintenance Command (Head Quarters at Nagpur)	

**Table 2: Tri-Service Command**

Tri-Service Command (2 Commands)	
Andaman and Nicobar Command (Established in 2001, this command is responsible for safeguarding India’s interest in the Straits of Malacca and Southeast Asia)	Strategic Force Command (Established in 2003, this Command is responsible for nuclear weapons)

For specific operational requirement of requirement and preparedness, the Indian Army is divided into 7 commands with 6 operational command and 1 training command. The General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) with the rank of Lieutenant General (3-star rank officer) is head of each Army Command.

For protecting the India’s vast maritime boundary, the Indian Navy is divided into 3 commands. The Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C) with the rank of Vice Admiral (3-star rank officer) is the head of each Naval Command. Besides, protecting the maritime borders, defending Indian Territory and protecting maritime trade and commerce, the Indian Navy is also actively engaging in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, search and rescue of boats and personal in distress, conducting hydrographic survey and mapping of the ocean and borders.

For securing the Indian Air Space and tackling Air Warfare in the time of conflict, Indian Air Force is divided into 7 commands with 5 operational commands and 2 functional commands. An Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (AOC-in-C) with the rank of an Air Marshal (3-star rank officer) is head of each Air Command. Besides, securing Indian Aerospace or Air Defence, the Indian Air Force is also performing a vital role for air lifting or emergency evacuation of Indian Nationals from other countries in times of wars, conflicts or adversary situations. And, also engaging with Indian Army and Indian Navy, during natural disaster, floods, disaster relief, search and rescue operations.

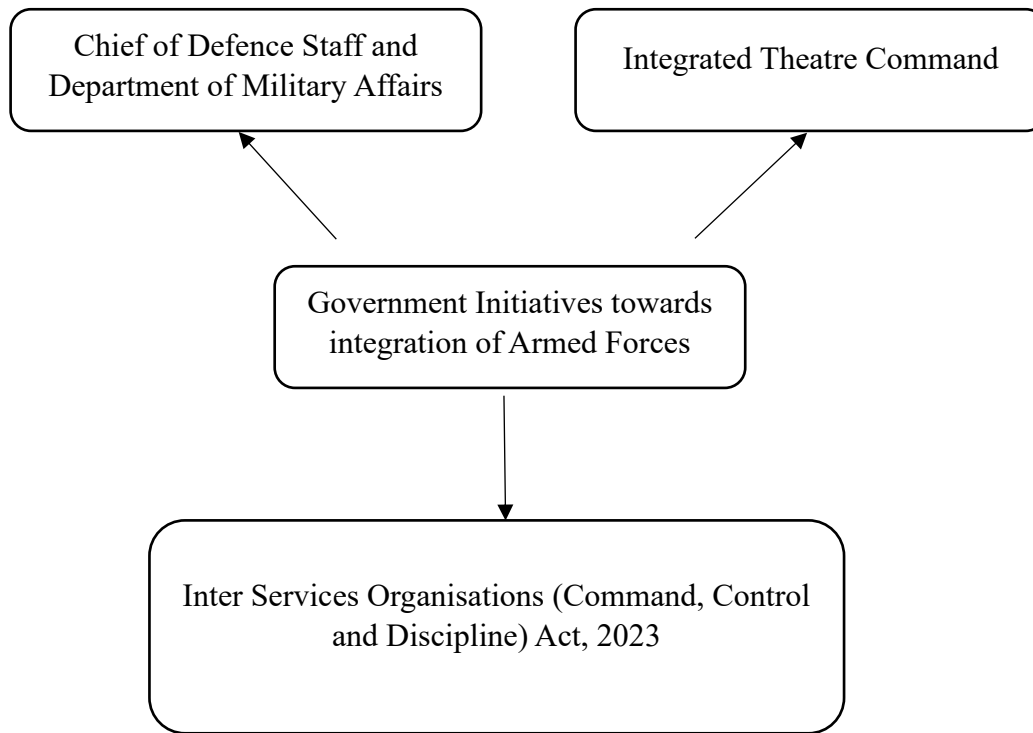
In addition, various Tri-Services and Inter-Services Organisations are also existing in India. These are National Defence Academy, Defence Space Agency, Defence Cyber Agency, Defence Intelligence Agency and Integrated Defence Staff.

**Government initiatives towards integration of Armed Forces**

The Government has taken various initiatives and measures towards integration and joint operation of the Armed Forces. The important initiatives of the Government are creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff and the establishment of Department of Military Affairs, Notification of Inter Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023 and formation of Integrated Theatre Command.

Further, Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant) initiatives in the defence sector aim to strengthen India’s defence industry by reducing imports and promoting indigenous production. The initiatives can enhance indigenous defence production, domestic procurement, innovation in indigenous technologies and exports in defence sectors including aerospace and naval shipbuilding.

**Figure 1: Government Initiatives towards Integration of Armed Forces**



### Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

The chief of Defence Staff is the principal military advisor to the Defence Minister on the matter connected with all Tri-Services (Army, Navy and Air Force). The CDS also heads the Department of Military Affairs (DMA), which promotes jointness in training, procurement and staffing for the Tri-Services.

The position of CDS was first suggested by the Kargil Review Committee headed by K. Subrahmanyam in the year 2000, after the Kargil War. Subsequently, a Group of Ministers (GoM) was tasked with studying the Kargil Review Committee report in the year 2001. The GoM recommended the creation of the CDS position. Further, Naresh Chandra Committee recommended the appointment of a Permanent Chairman of the Chief of Staff Committee in the year 2012. Finally, Shekatkar Committee recommended the creation of the CDS positions in India in the year 2016.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the creation of the CDS position in his Independence Day speech on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2019. Thereafter, the Cabinet Committee on Security took the historic decision on 24<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 towards creation of the post of the CDS to enhance the quality of military advice to political leadership by integrating the inputs from Army, Navy and Air Force. Further, the post of CDS and Department of Military Affairs is created, so as to facilitate a smooth transition towards integration of armed forces. Subsequently, General Bipin Rawat was appointed as the country’s first Chief of Defence Staff. The current CDS General Anil Chauhan was appointed on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2022. The post of CDS is not a new phenomenon, which is already existing in the countries like USA, UK, China, Canada, France, Italy and Japan.

### Role of Chief of Defence Staff in creation of an Integrated Theatre Command

Recently, the first Joint Commander’s Conference of the Armed Forces was held in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh on 4-5 September 2024. A significant event towards coordination and integration of Armed Forces

of India. The conference under the theme of “Sashakt and Surakshit Bharat: Transforming Armed Forces” was presided by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and attended by CDS, all service Chiefs of Indian Army, Navy, Air Force and Defence Secretary. The conference was focused on detailed deliberations on organizational structure for an Integrated Theatre Command and Joint Command for more efficient and coordinated military actions on multidimensional security challenges of India in future.

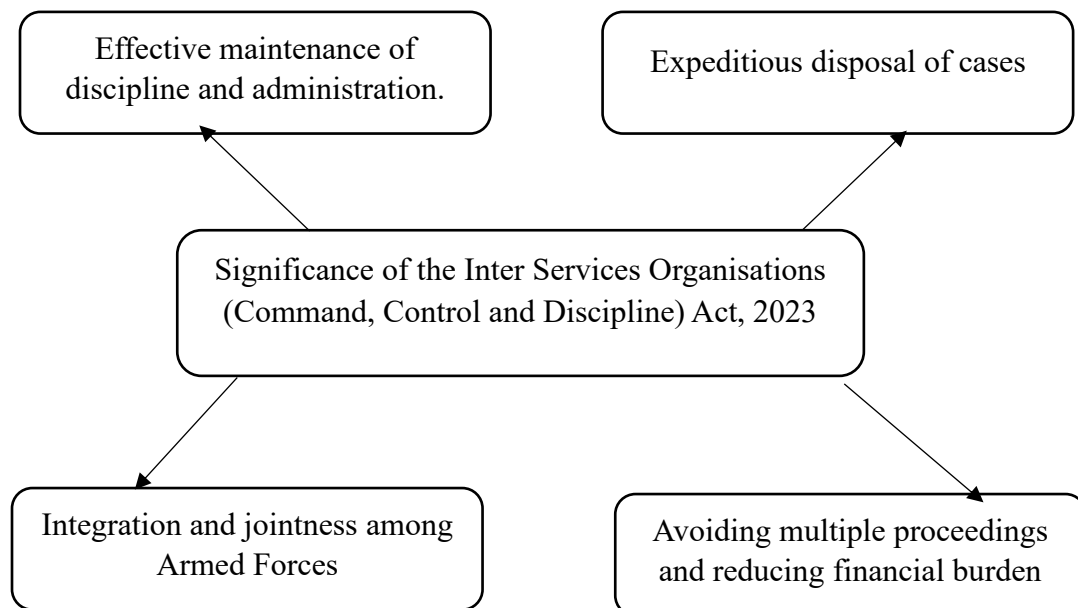
In the said conference, the CDS General Anil Chauhan said that “the importance of jointness and future plans for enhancing integration across various domains, which is crucial for future warfare and effect-based operations. It was a step-by-step process, beginning with Cross Service Co-operation leading to a ‘Joint Culture’ and finally achieving integration of forces for conduct joint operations”. In addition, the conference is also focused on establishment of command and control centres with requisite infrastructure facilities to facilitate a quick decision making.

As per the existing plan and proposal, China focused Northern Integrated Theatre Command will be located at Lucknow. Whereas, Pakistan focused Western Integrated Theatre Command will be located at Jaipur and Maritime Theatre Command will be located at Thiruvananthapuram for maritime security.

**The Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023**

The Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) bill was passed by parliament and received the assent of the president on August 15, 2023. Thereafter, the bill becomes an Act. Subsequently, the Act have been notified through a Gazette Notification with effect from 10th May, 2024. The Act was enacted to enhance joint defence capability and integration among the armed forces. The act empowered the Central Government to constitute an Inter-Service Organisations and Joint Services Command for effective military planning, training, operations and synergy. However, the Act does not propose any alteration to the existing Service Acts, Rules and Regulations. Moreover, the Act empowered the Commander-in-Chief and Officer-in-Command to exercise disciplinary and administrative control over personnel under their command irrespective of their Services (Army, Navy and Air Force).

**Figure 2: Significance of Inter Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023**



The Central Government is vested with the power of superintendence and to issue directions to the Inter-Services Organisations on any matter concerning National Security, General Administration and in the interest of public safety, as per the provisions stipulated under Section 9 of the Inter Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023.

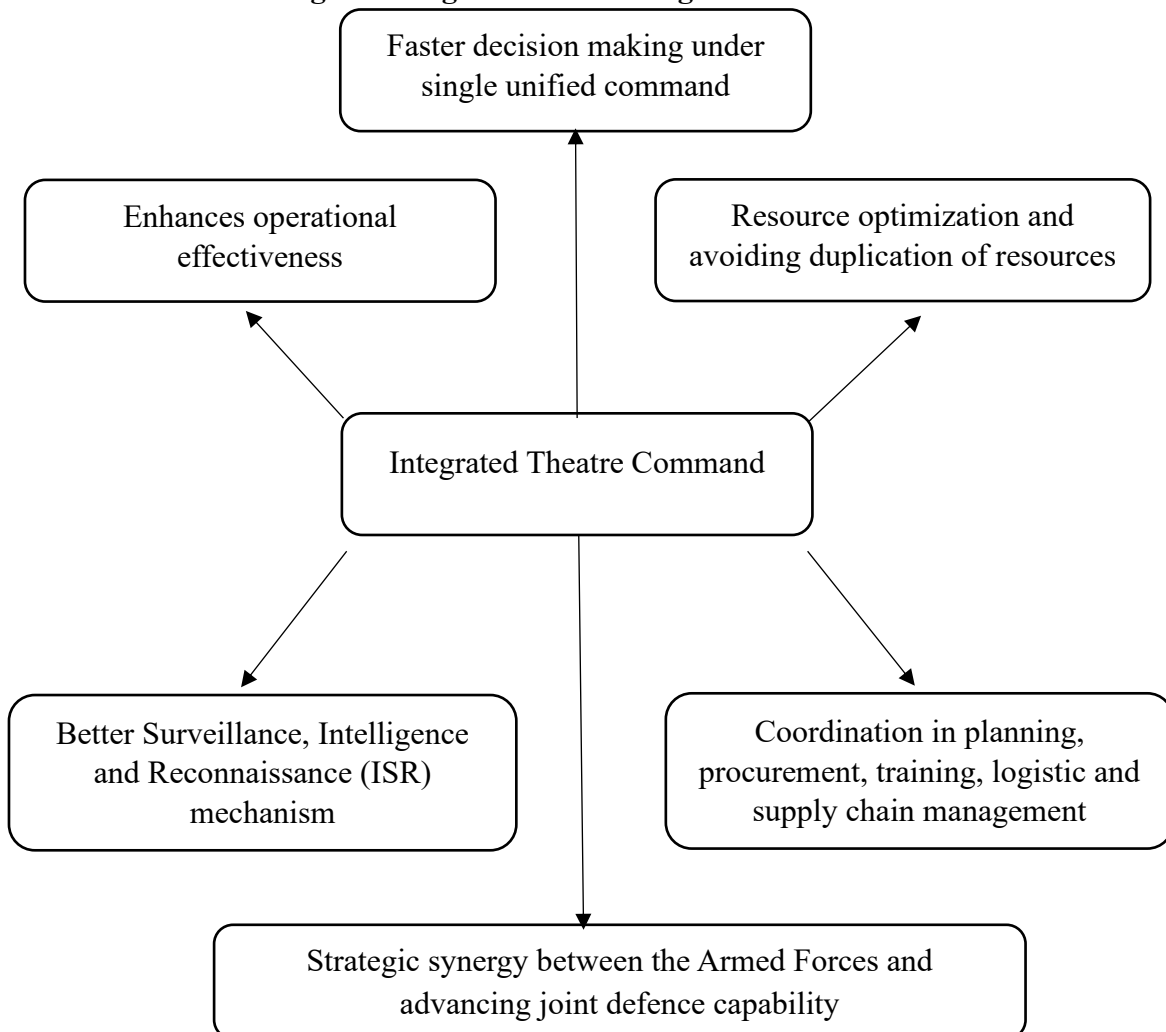
The Central Government may constitute an Inter-Services Organisations or Joint Command by Gazette Notification, as per the provisions stipulated under Section 5 of the said Act. The already existing and functioning Inter-Services Organisations and the Commander-in-Chief or the Officer-in-Command as the case may be, before the commencement of this Act is also deemed to be constituted under Section 6 of the said Act.

Further, the Commanding Officer of an Inter-Services Organisations shall, in addition to having command over any unit, ship or establishment also performs such duties as may be assigned to him in respect of such Inter-Services Organisation by its Commander-in-Chief or Officer in Command and shall be empowered to initiate all disciplinary or general administration, if it considers necessary and expedient so to do in the public interest.

**Significance of an Integrated Theatre Command**

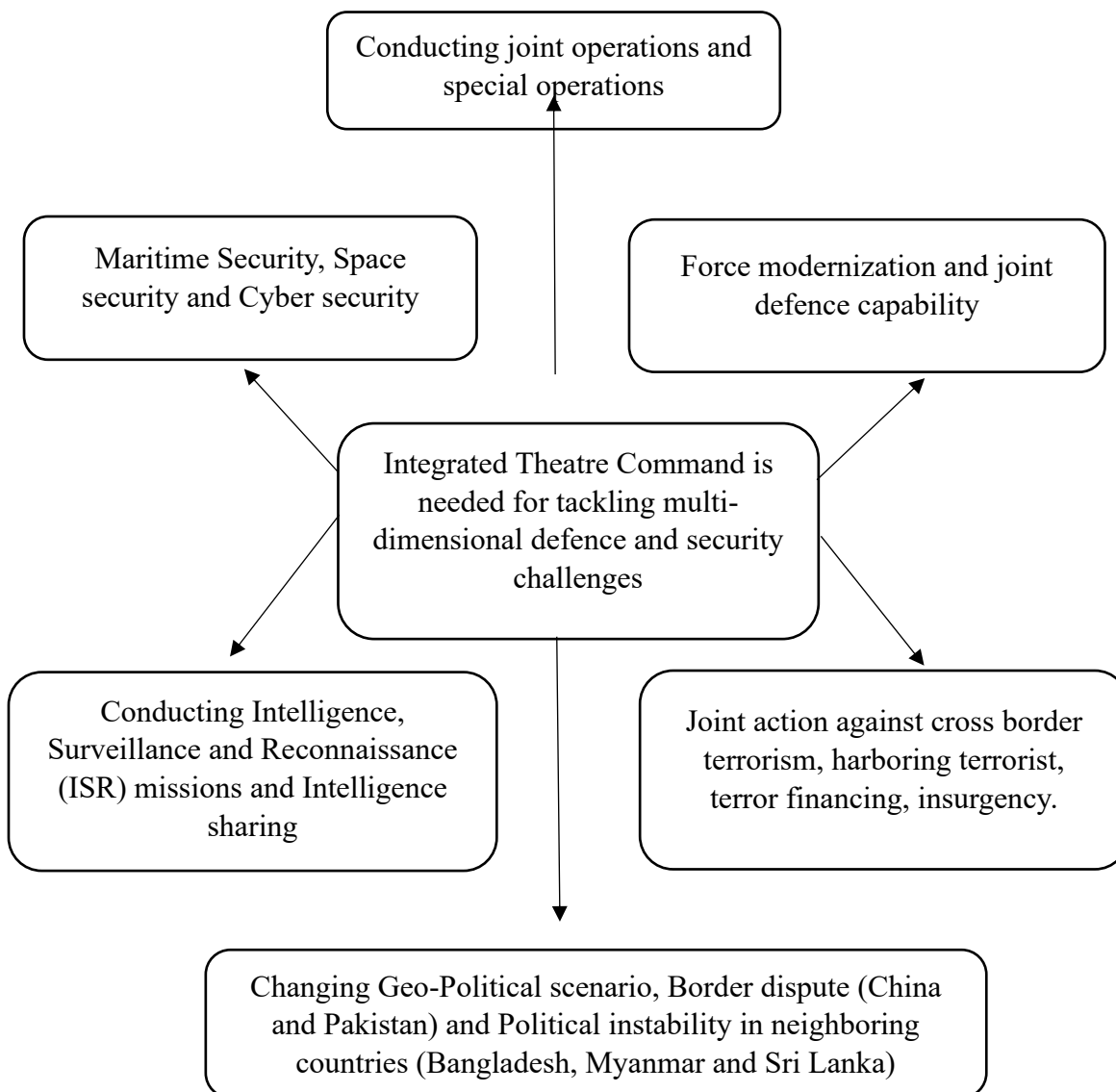
The significance of the Integrated Theatre Command is explained in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Significance of Integrated Theatre Command**



### Need of Integrated Theatre Command

An Integrated Theatre Command is needed for effectively countering emerging defence and multidimensional security challenges from multiple fronts in multi domain. An integrated approach is needed for modern warfare, futuristic warfare and hybrid warfare (combines conventional, irregular, nonmilitary tactics and cyber warfare to attack an adversary). Further, the changing dynamics of modern warfare such as disinformation campaign, misinformation, subversion, social media campaign, political warfare (regime change), disruptive technology, and proxy wars necessitates an Integrated Theatre Command.



“The biggest and foremost challenge is to prepare the military for next-generation warfare. This includes non-contact operations (Like cyber / Information warfare), low-intensity conflicts, asymmetric warfare and network centric warfare. Challenges also related to raising the technology threshold and dealing all nuances of multi-domain warfare. The nation has to be prepared, as some of these threats cut across all boundaries, extending beyond the military domain” (Bhutani 2016).



### Recommendation

An Integrated Theatre Command gives impetus to the strategic and tactical advantages at the time of wars, conflicts or emergent adversary situations. The integrated planning, procurement, training, coordination and strategic synergy between the armed forces are significant for combat readiness of the forces and military preparedness with evolving security threats. Further, an Integrated Theatre Command enhances the operational effectiveness, during coordinated and targeted attacks or strikes against adversaries on same time using multiple, combined and joint modes of operations in Land, Air, Water and Underwater. A well-equipped Integrated Theatre Command bolster strategic, geographic, economic and military significance.

Further, it is proposed that an integrated Tri-Services Space Command with an inclusion of the Indian Army, Navy and Airforce would enhance the strategic synergy between the armed forces in space security, counter space capability and tackling of various aerial threats. The critical technological advancement in the field of aerospace, rocket, missile, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and drone technology, disruptive technology and advanced satellite communication systems stressed the need of an integrated Tri-Service Space Command to effectively tackle the growing challenges in space domain and protection of the space assets and critical infrastructures of India.

Further, it is also emphasized that force modernization, indigenous technological development and indigenous weapon system can effectively tackle situations emerging from sudden disruption of critical and essential logistics and supplies from other countries, due to geopolitical tensions.

### Conclusion

Government of India has taken various initiatives and measures to integrate the armed forces such as the creation of the post of CDS, establishment of Department of Military Affairs, enactment and notification of Inter Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023 and also a proposal towards a creation of an Integrated Theatre Command. After detailed deliberations, the blueprint with the requisite command, control and operational structures for the Integrated Theatre Commands prepared by the current CDS General Anil Chauhan is almost ready for implementation. In this connection, the first Joint Commander Conference was held on 4-5 September, 2024 in Lucknow for submission of the plan and proposal to the Government for final approval. Therefore, an Integrated Theatre Command is extremely important for countering the emerging security and defence challenges in Modern and Futuristic warfare scenario.

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