



## INDIAN MARITIME SECURITY STRATEGY IN A THEATERISED ERA

Reorganisation or creation of military theatres in the contemporary security environment can be traced back to the post-World War 2 (WW 2) era when the reorganisation in the US was aimed at addressing interservice rivalries observed during WW 2, operational failures of the Vietnam War, subsequent operations like the failed Iran hostage rescue mission in 1979, and the invasion of Grenada in 1983.<sup>1</sup> In the US the debate for higher defence reorganisation started with the enactment of the National Security Act 1949 and culminated in the enactment of the Goldwater Nichols Act in 1986, despite reservations in the Department of Defence (DoD).

China's incentive to modernise and reorganise the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can be traced back to the US "shock and awe" doctrine used in the 1991 Gulf War, wherein the superior technology of the US outmanoeuvred Iraq.<sup>2</sup> At the time, China's domestic political scenario, especially the lack of money, delayed the advent of modernisation, which is currently ongoing at a rapid pace. Therefore, only lessons were imbibed for implementation later through the organisational theory-linked methods of scanning and vicarious learning.<sup>3</sup>



The creation of five theatre commands came much later in 2015, when Xi Jinping's move to reorganise the PLA into five theatre commands can be viewed as mirrored on the US model. While the US followed the democratic path of debate and discussion, the Chinese military reforms followed an authoritarian methodology with the Central Military Commission (CMC) effectively assuming central control of the PLA, the Peoples Armed Police (PAP) and the Militia, as well as the theatre commands.

In India's case the lessons of 1999 Kargil war and the ensuing reviews starting from the 2001 Kargil Review Committee (KRC) report has followed a meandering path. Though the creation of Headquarters Integrated Staff (HQIDS) in 2001 was a welcome step, the effectiveness of the overall change envisaged, towards an integrated and joint approach, was impacted by the delayed appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 2022. Militaries, given their strict hierarchical setup and tight bureaucratic norms, often display a somewhat predictable disinclination for change.<sup>4</sup> These aspects and the absence of an act of parliament to legally enforce the changes required to meet the overall aim has perhaps diluted the fervour with which the whole exercise was started in 2001. The recent Joint Commanders' Conference (JCC) held in Lucknow in early Sep 2024 apparently discussed the blueprint, with the requisite command, control and operational structures for the theatre commands.<sup>6</sup> The envisaged integrated and joint approach has seen progress in the areas of administration, planning and acquisition of assets, with the creation of the Department of Military Affairs and evolved working of the HQIDS, the panning out of individual service strategies through the joint window of the theatre commands is yet to germinate. This would require an in depth understating of not only the strategies but also the doctrinal aspects these strategies are based upon. This paper will examine the nuances linked to executing the Indian Maritime Security Strategy in a theaterised era.

### Strategies and Doctrines



***This paper examines the nuances of executing the Indian Maritime Security Strategy in a theaterised era, amid evolving joint structures and strategic doctrines inspired by global best practices.***

While strategies can be formulated at various levels for corresponding aspects, there is the requirement of governing political guidance from the highest levels of the government that serves the purpose of civilian control in a democracy. For nations who have a CDS and in the US case a Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) and Combatant Commanders, the start point is the National Security Strategy (NSS). In the US case, which is considered an example to imbibe best practices from, there is a four-step approach. The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defence Reorganisation Act requires the President to submit an annual report on the NSS to the congress.<sup>7</sup> Next is National Defence Strategy (NDS) issued by the Secretary of Defence every four years that outlines how the Department of Defence will contribute to achieve the objectives set out in the NSS.<sup>8</sup> The Goldwater-Nichols Act also charges the CJCS, the President, and the Secretary of Defence with providing strategic direction for the armed forces, that is done via the National Military Strategy (NMS), which is the third step. The Combatant Commanders, who are responsible to the President and to the Secretary of Defence for the performance of missions assigned to that command by the President or

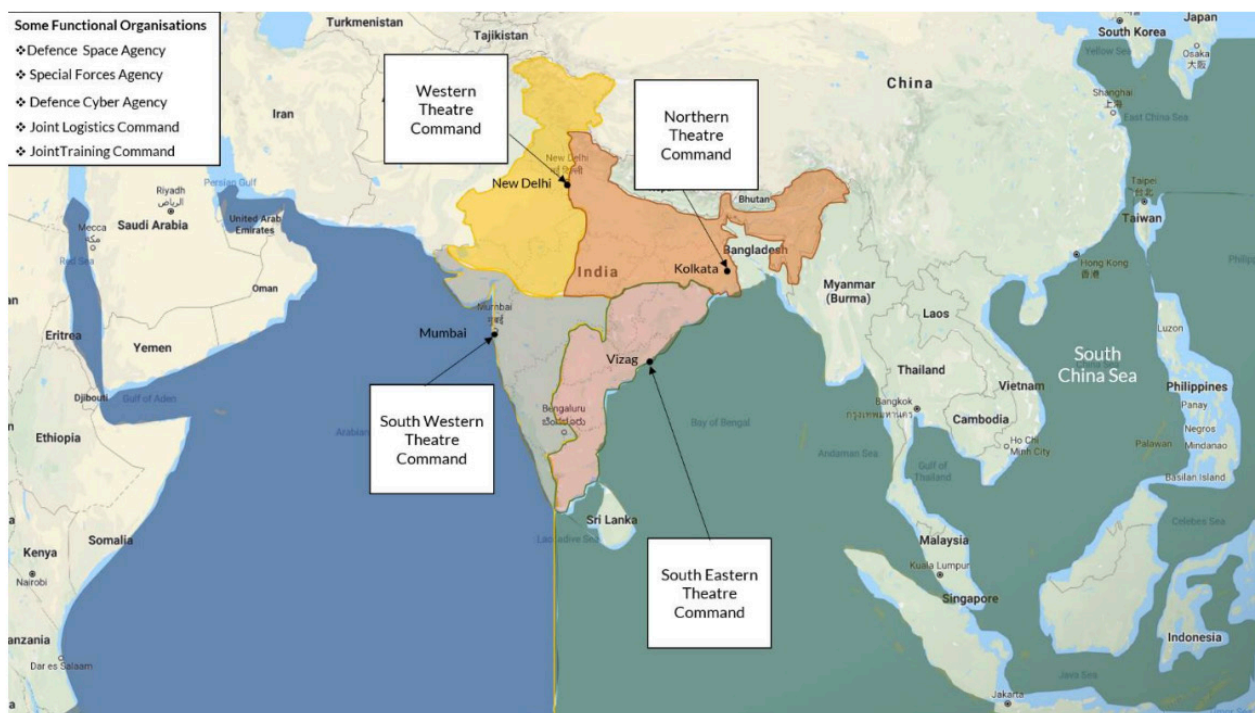


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by the Secretary of Defence with the approval of the President, then issue guidance that are operational in nature, stemming from the NSS, NDS, and NMS. At the single service level the directives are based on the NMS and for the Navy the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) will focus on the operational and logistics aspects to achieve the given strategic aims. The setting up of this process, which at times misses some steps and reports, took 37 years from the enactment of the National Security Act in 1949 to the enactment of the Goldwater Nichols Act in 1986. In India the timeline, which started from the 2001 KRC report, is only 23 years old.

Hence, the new structure will need time to establish and more importantly the inter-relations and command and control structure between the political establishment, CDS, HQIDS, Theatre Commands and the Single Services. It would also necessitate a change in the drafting and execution of strategies, of which an important part is understanding the doctrinal nuances on which such strategies are based. Presently, India has a Joint Doctrine of the Armed Forces (JDI AF), single service doctrines and strategy documents. While the absence of a National Security Strategy flowing from the top echelons of the government available in the open

domain is missing, a Joint Strategy Indian Armed Forces (JSIAF) could be considered, which would encompass the requisite components of the Raksha Mantri's (RM) Operational Directives and single service strategies and bind them for integrated operations at the theatre command level. Ideally this could be at the level of the RM and could stand in till the NSS is formulated. There will be a need for personnel across the board to understand the single service concept of operations and forge a 'common language' that would flow from the single service doctrines. This would also aid the formulation of the JSIAF and drafting of the Theatre Commanders directives. There has been a start to the creation of a common language that finds mention in JDI AF 2017 under the Chapter 5 – Integrated and Joint Structures. Apart from the JDI AF there are other joint doctrines, and all these joint doctrines would require a review once the new defence structure with the operationalisation of theatre commands is established. The blueprint will take time to be fully established, and the actual implementation, integration and allocation of units under the theatre commands, planned to be headquartered at Lucknow, Jaipur, and Thiruvananthapuram (for the Maritime Theatre Command) could take a year or two.<sup>10</sup> However, it would take more time for percolation of

concepts and strategic nuances as part of normative thinking, which would require a new generation of civil and military personnel groomed in an integrated and joint environment.

## Maritime Doctrine and Strategy

Executing the maritime security strategy of would require a thorough understanding of the Indian Maritime Doctrine (IMD) and the Maritime Security Strategy. Certain parts of the former were updated<sup>11</sup> to be aligned with latter, the unclassified document of which was released in the public domain in 2015 as *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy*<sup>12</sup> While the continental related aspects are well understood by the Indian Army and Indian Air Force understanding of the maritime aspects will require a fine balance of continentality and maritimity security equation. Operations in the maritime domain require an understanding of the normative operational aspects as well as operational aspects in an environment that is governed by bilateral and multilateral understandings, international laws and conventions, as well as customary law that apply mainly in the waters beyond the territorial sea. Successful strategies and operational plans are proof of sound concepts; hence the understanding of doctrines and the encompassed concepts are vital. The US INDOPACOM covers a maritime dominant area. This perhaps why, since inception in 1947, the 27 US INDOPACOM Commanders have all been from the US Navy, while out of the 20 Deputy Commanders 18 have been from the rest of the three US military services. In comparison, CENTCOM established in 1983 and covers a more land dominant area, has had 15 Commanders from the Army and Marines and only one from the US Navy, while the 21 Deputy Commanders have been from all four US military services.

For an integrated approach to the maritime domain there is a need for a deep understanding of single service doctrines and concepts, single service strategies and operational planning imperatives, requirement of assets and numbers, and overall, the role of a service as an instrument of national power. For theatre commands to succeed, and achievement

of a balance in the continentality-maritimity security equation, there is the need of aligning existing concepts, doctrines and strategies to the domain of land, air and sea. In this context amphibious operations, which have been considered the epitome of integration and jointness merits examination. While amphibious operations are exercised in a conflict scenario as a method of hard power employment from sea to land, the assets especially ships, helicopters, and transport aircraft are essential assets that can be used during Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Non-combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO). In so far as hard power employment is concerned the doctrinal alignments are as follows:

- **JDIAF 2017** places these operations under joint military operations by which method land power is projected ashore from sea.
- **IMD updated 2015** places these operations as a joint military operation and a form of power projection wherein land power is projected ashore from sea.
- **Indian Army Doctrine 2018** places these operations as a part of fore projection capability.
- **Indian Air Force Doctrine 2022** does not mention the term, however based on the IAF role in amphibious operations certain aspects have been placed under the No War No Peace (NWNP) Air Strategy and the Wartime Air Strategy, like Information Dominance, Shaping Operations, Favourable Air Situation (FAS) and Coordinated Air Operations.

India's CDS, on 09 September 2024, released the latest edition of the Joint Doctrine on Amphibious Operation.<sup>14</sup> The first joint doctrine on amphibious operations published in 2008 was available online while the 2024 is not. Hence it can only be assumed that doctrinal alignment with respect to amphibious operations has been achieved in the joint doctrine.

Budgetary constraints will always direct acquisitions based on priorities, more so in an integrated environment. Capital acquisitions due to high expenditure over long timelines till delivery, have been the main 'bone of contention'. Assets and numbers

required by military services fulfill building and maintaining requisite capacity and capabilities, which in turn are the base for execution of successful strategies and operational plans. An integrated approach based on an understanding of concepts could lead to an 'and' acquisition approach rather an 'or' approach. A few examples are illustrated in the maritime context. Debates on Sea Control and Sea Denial have led to the assumption that either one can safeguard India's national interests. Such assumptions and subsequent connected acquisition decisions will only serve to dilute Indian Navy's strategies related to deterrence, conflict and peace time operations, especially the *Shaping of a Favourable Positive Maritime Environment*.<sup>15</sup> The last supports the vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) and the various foreign policies like Neighbourhood First, Act East, Look West, Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), and initiatives that flow from the Quad meetings held at the level of heads of state and foreign ministers. JDIAF 2017 mentions Sea Control and Sea Denial as two specific and important concepts under which the Indian Navy would conduct a wide range of operations. This alignment with the IMD signifies an understanding of the concept of maritime operations that has been amplified in the IMSS 2015. Sea Control<sup>16</sup> is a concept similar to that of the IAFs FAS and perhaps the Army's concept of Land Control. As per IMSS 2015, Sea Control is the central concept of the Indian Navy's employment and a prerequisite for most naval operations. History and successful operations are testament that Carrier Battle Groups (CBGs) are the best combination of platforms to achieve Sea Control. Hence, in order to achieve the maritime security objectives stated in IMSS 2015, Indian Navy is looking at three to six aircraft carriers.<sup>17</sup> In comparison Sea Denial more relevant to conflict and is both an offensive and defensive measure aimed at reducing the adversary's freedom of action and degrading the operating capability. Like Sea Control, history and successful operations indicate that submarines are the best asset to exercise Sea Denial, the degree of which can be enhanced by mining and maritime strikes. Therefore, while aircraft carriers are costly, they are essential commodities for a maritime nation with an expanding maritime horizon, which, for India, is presently the Indo-Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

While the theatre command blueprint discussed at the JCC 2024 is yet to be rolled out there are indications that there will be three theatre commands headquartered at Jaipur, Lucknow and Thiruvananthapuram with areas of responsibility as follows:<sup>19</sup>

- Jaipur would look at the entire India-Pakistan border except the India-Pak boundary in Jammu and Kashmir.
- Lucknow would look at the entire India-China border frontier from Ladakh to the easternmost extreme of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Thiruvananthapuram would exercise control over the maritime theatre.

There would be occasions where maritime assets would need to be deployed to support the other two theatres while operating in the maritime domain. This inter-theatre operability would require close coordination between commands unless the maritime assets are placed under the direct control of the other command for a specified operation. This aspect would require a good understanding of maritime doctrines, and strategic and operational exploitation methodology of



***Achieving India's maritime security objectives in a theaterised structure demands an integrated understanding of doctrines like Sea Control and Sea Denial, supported by coordinated inter-theatre operability and strategic asset deployment.***

the assets. In short, the three services need to learn to speak a 'common language' to achieve a high degree of integration and jointness. The rationale for selection of Thiruvananthapuram as headquarters of the maritime command is not clear, especially where there exists connected operational centres like Mumbai, Visakhapatnam and Karwar. Karwar may be a better option as it houses the largest Indian Naval Base and is still developing, and thus can be configured to house the new maritime command headquarters and obviate replication of new infrastructure and other support facilities at Thiruvananthapuram. However, the remoteness of Karwar with respect to rail and air connectivity, which is limited and non-existent respectively, would have to be addressed.

## Conclusion

Creation of theatre commands from existing single service structures is an arduous task as it necessitates a change in mind set and breaking of stovepipes that have cocooned the existing structures for decades, and in some cases centuries. The path to theaterisation in India has been through 23 years of discussions and debate. While the blueprint discussed during JCC 2024 will take time to be approved and implemented there are changes that will need to overcome mindsets and the biggest one would be acceptance and alignment of single service doctrines and strategies. While JDIAF 2017 was a start point towards alignment of doctrines, and the idea of integration and joint structures, future JDIAFs would have to be more comprehensive and address alignment issues while the single service doctrines would remain the base for operational concepts to be implemented and exploited by single service doctrines. Till the time a National Security Strategy is implemented, formulation of a JSIAF aligning the single service strategies would have to be expedited. These base documents at the joint and single service levels would ease interoperability both intra and inter theatre command. There will be a longish gestation time for integrated and joint approaches to working. Some issues could remain till such time the generation of personnel groomed in integration and jointness come of age and are

able to balance the continentality-maritime security equation. Even then issues will arise and need to be resolved at the appropriate levels, especially where capital acquisition is concerned. There are many examples of integration and theaterisation existing across the world, with the US example being a time-tested template. Thus, while best practices from other examples can be adopted or modified to fit India's requirement, the uniqueness of India's security concerns on the borders and beyond require a contemporary approach with some out of the box thinking. Though India's maritime security strategy would be the writ of the maritime theatre command, other commands could at times be involved, and personnel may find themselves overseeing maritime operations. IMSS 2015 states that "Although land has been the primary and natural habitat of mankind, and is central to political, economic, military and social activities, the oceans have directly and indirectly influenced events on land" and identifies "To Influence events on land" as one of the main objectives in the military role.<sup>20</sup> ●

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