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Chief of the Air Staff,  
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PVSM AVSM VM ADC



## INDIAN AIR FORCE RAISING DAY



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# ASSET ALLOCATION TIME : RIGHT OR NOT

That is not to say that air forces can fight and win wars on their own, but the converse is also true — it is hard to imagine a modern army fighting and winning a war on its own without significant involvement of the air force. A substantial application of air power would actually take place away from where the army can see it from the ground.



**GP CAPT AK SACHDEV (RETD)**

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**E**ver since the Indian Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) commenced its endeavours to infuse jointmanship into our three defence services, there has been disagreement between the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force (IAF) on the quantum and the mechanics of air support to be provided to the former by the latter. However, the fact that IAF has its own roles other than air support was never under doubt. The DSSC faculty has agreed to disagree on some issues but each service has respected the other's point of view while expressing its own. In the same vein, disagreements during actual operations have been resolved to a degree adequate for joint operations to be effectively carried out. One of the fond hopes from

the installation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was that jointmanship would achieve loftier levels of sophistication. Thus, it was with apprehension that military and strategic analysts

registered the CDS proclaiming on 02 July that, "Do not forget that air force continues to remain a supporting arm to the armed forces, just as the artillery or the engineer support the



*Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, Tamil Nadu.*

combatant arms in the army.” With these disquieting words, he relegated Indian Air Force (IAF), the world’s fourth largest, to an arm subservient to the army, discounting a century of air power application, demolishing lessons learnt from cauldrons of military history, and spurning practical wisdom of nations that have employed air power over countless campaigns. It was not

only his choice of words that was unfortunate and inappropriate, but also the forum and the venue where they were uttered. The statement came at a think-tank event related to counter-terrorism which had nothing to do with air power. Moreover, the timing was most inopportune as the theatre command conundrum currently occupies military attention and demands balanced judgement

on issues of integration and jointmanship. Fortunately, reactions from serving military men, including the Chief of Air Staff (CAS), have been sober and subdued although many veterans have been critical. Any hopes that the CDS may clarify that his statement only alluded to what support army needed from IAF and did not exclude other roles and tasks of the IAF have receded with time. His statement has lent a new and disturbing angle to the ongoing exercise to get theatre commands in place.

**The media** had been pointing out that the **IAF had reservations** about the **theatre command**



*General Bipin Rawat, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).*

### **Doctrinal Background**

The fundamental issue troubling integration is doctrine. The IAF had prepared for itself a doctrine (Air Power Doctrine) in 1995 and revised it in 2007 with lessons learnt from Kargil et al. The doctrine document remained classified until in 2012, an unclassified “Basic Doctrine of the Indian Air Force” was promulgated. The preface of that document lists three aerial campaigns (Counter Air, Counter Surface Force and Strategic) and professes that “Air power remains the lynchpin of any joint application of combat power in modern warfare. Space is no longer a frontier.” It is apparent that the CDS has a radically different vision of things and wants to employ IAF in a tactical role supporting theatre commands. On the other hand, the IAF sees as its stated mission “To acquire strategic reach and capabilities across the spectrum of conflict that serve the ends of military diplomacy, nation-building and enable force projection within India’s strategic area to influence.”

A Joint Doctrine of the armed forces were produced by the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) in 2006 as a classified document; later it was revised and declassified in 2017.

The Joint Doctrine aims to “coalesce, synthesise and harmonize the tenets, beliefs and principles of the different Services into one common, officially enunciated and accepted guideline for carrying out Joint Operations.” Although this doctrine does not include any guidelines on theatre commands (possibly due to security considerations), it ought to have been the Bible on integration and jointmanship. However, in actual fact, it offers no resolution of the differences between single service perceptions.

### Philosophical Divergence

The single major point of divergent opinion is that the army sees a commander as someone who commands forces and assets placed directly under his command. This concept sounds reasonable and easy to grasp but its corollary is more complex; the army also sees anything not under its command as not reliably available to it. When it comes to air assets, that translates into the assets being physically in a geographical area under the commander, with the personnel including crew available at the beck and call of the commander for undertaking missions at short notice. The army’s viewpoint is

The **raison d’etre** for theatre commands is **integrating the services** to achieve **higher** levels of **jointmanship**

understandable as its learning of history lessons teaches it that any assets or forces not under command cannot be relied upon to undertake missions when required by the commander.

This author recalls the army insisting on having all IAF helicopters with offensive roles being placed under it for operational purposes; however, as it lacked the wherewithal and expertise to maintain and administer these helicopters, the administrative control was to remain with the IAF. This arrangement was formalized under a document titled ‘The Joint Implementation Instruction 1986’ but remained a less than satisfying experience for either service. The CDS apparently wants to put into place an arrangement wherein IAF assets are in direct support of theatre commanders under their command. Unfortunately, that appears untenable from the IAF viewpoint.

### IAF Point Of View

For some time before the CDS’s statement, the media had been pointing out that the IAF had reservations about the theatre command; the Chief of Air Staff (CAS) Air Chief Marshal Bhadauria, and several IAF veterans including an ex-CAS have clarified that the IAF was not opposed to the concept of theatre commands but had issues with the way their establishment was being envisaged. Some veterans have openly questioned the need to set up theatre commands in the Indian context.

The oft-cited illustrations of theatre commands are the US, Russia and China. The US has about 20 times more aircraft than India while the other two have around five times. The IAF has sanctioned 42 squadrons but has around 30 now, with the figure moving Southward currently as old aircraft become unusable. This shortfall,



IAF conducted maritime air operations on the Western sea board as part of the massive IAF Exercise Gaganshakti-2018.





*Sukhoi Su-30MKI.*

and the two-front threat, a potent and extant one, militate with the notion of apportioning aircraft assets to theatre commands.

Exercise Shaheen, conducted every year jointly by Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and Pakistan Air Force (PAF) since 2011 is a constant reminder to us of this scenario. In 2018, the IAF carried out Exercise Gagan Shakti 2018 with the objective of rehearsing a two-front war; the exercise was conducted in two phases on two different fronts. The implication is clear: the IAF does not have adequate combat aircraft assets to deploy on two fronts simultaneously, leave alone split them into six parts — three land theatres, one Air Defence Command, one Maritime Command, and the ANC and still perform strategic tasks. The IAF's aircraft are largely multi-role and apportioning them off "under command" deployment amongst six theatres would negate the basic and well-respected air power attributes of flexibility and concentration. The IAF is not against theatre commands, it just wants the current approach to be

modified to defer to the facts of small numbers and basic principles of air power.

General Giulio Douhet, an Italian artillery officer is considered one of the finest air theorists; a century ago he wrote, 'Il dominio dell'aria' (or 'The Command of the Air') which was first published in Italy in 1921. Many of the concepts he presented remain relevant today and one of them is the need to establish "command of the air" as the first objective in any campaign. It strains one's imagination to conjure a scenario wherein a severely depleted, 30-squadron IAF could achieve command of the air when its combat aircraft are stretched out over six theatre commands. The issue IAF is stressing on is that a methodology needs to be discovered that permits IAF to carry out its primary (strategic) tasks under its centralised control while meeting theatre command needs (and wants!). Ideally, both of the above should be feasible but currently they are not.

For the basic requirement of 'command of the air', IAF has to mandatorily execute the Counter

Air and Strategic campaigns, which are its primary campaigns. These need to be done alongside Counter Surface Force which are largely tactical (albeit one odd operation may acquire a strategic hue) and for which flying effort (rather than aircraft) can be assigned temporarily to theatres, depending on how that theatre's operations are progressing.

A centralised control for prioritisation of scarce, multi-role aircraft would make more sense than "under command" assets which one theatre commander would be loath to part with — even temporarily — to another theatre as his battle(s) would always be of supreme importance to him.

### **Limiting IAF**

As the majority of modern fighters are multi-role, tying them down to one theatre's geographical or role-defined limits is unwise. Their deployment and redeployment ought to be dictated by the priorities of the theatres and the pressures they are under. Air assets can be moved around or utilised depending on how the war (single or two-front) is progressing. If that has to happen, the control over air

assets has to be centralised and not placed under command of theatres. Army operations are largely tactical in nature while the IAF is, by dint of its aircraft and structure, a strategic force. Consigning a strategic force in small parts under tactically oriented theatre commands would leave the air force incapable of executing its own strategic roles while reducing its tactical efficacy drastically.

### Concluding Remarks

The “air force continues to remain a supporting arm” comment does not bode well for the proposed theatre command structure. As the CDS has neither qualified nor retracted his comment about the air force, it is easy to predict similar thoughts and statements in the future about other organisations that need to be integrated. Indian Coast Guard, Border Security Force, Assam Rifles, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and Border Roads Organisation are some of the fairly autonomous organisations that the CDS may want to put in their place by telling them how they are nothing but supporting arms (or services).

The air element of warfare is just a century old and made its debut, quite naturally, as supporting air arms to the armies. Since then, the lessons learnt through the two world wars and numerous wars and campaigns involving the use of air power have evolved air arms into full-fledged air forces. Their impact has included significant strategic employment and the role of air forces on outcomes of wars and battles is not open to skepticism. That is not to say that air forces can fight and win wars on their own, but the converse is also true —



*Women officers of ITBP guarding the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China.*

it is hard to imagine a modern army fighting and winning a war on its own without significant involvement of the air force. A substantial application of air power would actually take place away from where the army can see it from the ground.

CDS's mandate from the government includes “Facilitation of restructuring of military commands for optimal utilisation of resources by bringing about jointness in operations, including through establishment of joint / theatre commands.” Thus, the eventual establishment of theatre commands is a fait accompli but the CDS's statement has highlighted the need for reaching consensus first. The raison d'être for theatre commands is integrating the services to achieve higher levels of jointmanship. A single careless statement has raised a veritable impediment to that laudable

objective; that is the single major factor that ordains a slow path to theatre commands if they are to achieve the final objectives of integration and jointmanship that the Indian military needs. While the essentials are in place, the right atmosphere is not. Single service perceptions and opinions about integration and jointmanship are not going to change by creating theatre commands. On the other hand, these are an inescapable prerequisite for theatre commands to function effectively.

There are other reasons too for not hurrying into setting up theatre commands and the best course of action would be to achieve a confluence of the three services' perceptions before hastily erecting theatre command HQs that are dysfunctional from day one. The directive to the CDS on establishment of theatre commands did not specify that it is to be done by (and within the tenure of) the current CDS. The theatre command concept will probably be good in the long run but it is not yet time for it to be activated. **DSA**

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