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# ‘Jointness’ in the Armed Forces: An Assessment

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## Introduction

Jointness is a military term, as explained by the Collins Dictionary, which refers to “the cooperation and integration of different branches of the military”.<sup>1</sup> India has the fourth largest military in the world and each operates independently. The cooperation among the three Services is according to the priorities as visualised by each Service, with coordination by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). In April 2017, the three Service Chiefs released the latest Joint Doctrine for the Indian armed forces.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the first doctrine was written in 2006 and was a classified version which was not released to the public. The current document has very little depth and would not be able to integrate the various branches of the Indian armed forces. There would be no joint response to a military situation. Currently, there are more than 32 countries with joint Services set-ups.<sup>3</sup>

Issues regarding jointness have been discussed in India right from the time of independence. As is reported, the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten was keen to appoint a Chief of Defence Staff and repeatedly argued for a Joint Staff. At that point of time, there was resistance from the political leaders and the bureaucratic class who were fearful of an empowered military. Later, as the three Services became stronger, the senior officers

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found greater privileges in being autonomous rather than getting joint. It is pertinent to note that it was after the defence reforms were instituted in 2001 post the Kargil War and the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS) was introduced, that the absence of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) was prominently felt. Gradually, the Army and Navy have agreed to the concept of joint Theatre Commands. But the Indian Air Force (IAF) feels that it has a lot to lose and is still resisting the Theatre Command concept. It states that Theatre Commands would hamper its flexibility.

It is in this context that the Joint Services Doctrine does not offer anything which alters the status quo. Jointness is a holistic concept whereas the document speaks of joint operations which comprise a component of the concept. The doctrine makes no reference to the Andaman and Nicobar Command, the only Joint Command apart from the Strategic Forces Command, which has a unique role. It is obvious that there is a need for the entire document to be enlarged to include the required details of jointness in the present Indian context.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, there is a need for the three Services and the government to understand the need of jointness. In view of this, the paper seeks to look into the historical aspects of this factor of 'jointness' and, thereby, provide a solution.

### **Historical Aspects**

Military operations have currently been impacted by two issues. The first is nuclear weapons and the second is pressure from the international environment. These issues narrow the time window available for undertaking conventional operations. Accordingly, the time available for attaining strategic goals is extremely limited. Further, precision weapons being fired from aircraft, and missiles and artillery guns have enabled depth engagement of targets. The recent engagement of the Jaish camp at Balakot by the Indian Air Force on February 26, 2019, bears testimony to the fact. In conjunction with this aspect is the networking of forces.

This leads to a quick sensor-to-shooter link. The sensor or the shooter could belong to the most appropriate Service. In such eventualities, there is a need for synergised action among the Services. The current system of the three Services trying to find a solution to the problem of which should be the sensor or the shooter is unsuited and not effective in the current environment. Often, it is stated that this would be needed by powers having a global outreach and not by the Indian armed forces. This is certainly incorrect as the armed forces, with their headquarters located in New Delhi, would have to respond to situations in the Bay of Bengal or operations being undertaken by the Special Forces in Arunachal Pradesh or in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). As brought out earlier, 32 countries have integrated their forces due to the current operational needs.

It would be pertinent to understand what happened after independence. Major General Lionel Ismay, who was the Chief of Staff to the Viceroy, proposed a Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) comprising the three Service Chiefs. The position of Chairman was to be held by the Service Chief who had served the longest in the chair. Thus, it was a position by rotation. This was similar to what existed in Great Britain after World War II. However, two great Commanders, General Douglas MacArthur and General Eisenhower, who conducted very large scale tri-Service operations, found that the Higher Defence Organisation (HDO) had many flaws and this resulted in the subsequent integration of the Services in the United States (US). The US has a Chairman Joint Chief of Staff who is the principal military adviser. All operational responsibility was vested in the integrated Theatre Commands which had components from the three Services subordinated to them. The Chiefs of Staff were a part of the Joint Chief of Staff but had no direct operational involvement in their commands.

Likewise, the United Kingdom changed to a joint system in 1963. It was known as the Joint Forces Headquarters (JF HQ). The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) heads the organisation. He exercises command

over all operations in which the Services are involved. Since then, Russia, Australia, France and Germany have switched over to the integrated system with a principal military adviser.<sup>5</sup> Xi Jinping, the Chinese President, has announced a set of military reforms which are currently being implemented. This has the entire People's Liberation Army (PLA) placed under the Central Military Commission (CMC) and there are five Joint Theatre Commands which have all the three Services under the Joint Theatre Commander, along with two others Services, the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and the PLA Strategic Support Force (PLASSF). Thereby, it is imperative that the Indian armed forces synergise for optimisation of national resources.

### **Journey of Jointness**

In the case of India, the journey of 'jointness' commenced soon after independence. The two institutions that started on a joint note were the National Defence Academy (NDA) at Kharakvasla (originally started as the Joint Services Wing at Clementown, Dehradun) and the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) at Wellington, Tamil Nadu. The NDA was to train officer cadets of the three Services and develop a sense of camaraderie and friendship. The institution has, over a period of time, garnered immense spirit amongst its alumni. The DSSC is another institution where officers with about 12 years' service attend a year-long course. This has separate courses for the Army, Navy and Air Force. However, jointness only comes for a few discussions and tri-Service exercises. There is a need to streamline the syllabus to have more than 50 per cent on a joint mode to enhance the integration between the officers. In 1960, the National Defence College was established, for enabling officers of the three Services, along with a few representatives from the civil services. Here they are pitched with issues at the national level. The course has strategic games which lucidly deal with all aspects of India's problems. The College of Defence Management (CDM) at

Secundrabad was opened later and officers who have commanded units are put through a pragmatic Management Course. Recently, the Higher Command Course of the three Services began a Joint Capsule which is run at the Army War College, Mhow. All this assists the officers from the three Services in understanding the nuances of their functioning and brings about inter-Service camaraderie.

Moving on to the battlefield, India's first experience of jointness was during the first war with Pakistan in 1947-48. The war essentially involved the Army but the Air Force was used for transporting troops and equipment. Later, in 1961, Goa was liberated in a two-day operation by the three Services. This was a simple task, with no resistance. This was followed by the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The war was a wake-up call to the nation and its armed forces. The Indian Army was outwitted in the state of Arunachal and Ladakh. The Air Force, despite being a credible force, was not used and this made it easy for the Chinese forces to operate with less resistance. The three Services were put to test again in the 1965 War and this time, as the Chief of the Air Staff stated on many occasions, that there was no plan which was conceived before the operations. As a matter of fact, the Air Force was directed to provide air support once the Pakistani offensive was on in the Akhnoor sector. It is pertinent to note that operations had commenced prior to this in the area of Kashmir and the Hajipir Pass was captured by the Indian Army. Similarly, the Indian Navy was on its own and its contribution did not form a part of the overall plan.

The 1971 War was a major operation in which all the Services were employed. The Chief of the Army Staff wanted time to prepare and also ensure that operations were launched after the monsoons, and when winter had set in to ensure that the mountain passes were blocked with snow. There was a seven-month preparatory time but there was no integrated plan. However, during the war, each Service was on its own and there was little coordination. This has been substantiated by the Chief of the Air Staff

and Chief of the Naval Staff.<sup>6</sup> In his book *My Years with the IAF*, Air Chief Marshal P C Lal clearly talks about the differences with the Army Chief on critical issues. Admiral S M Nanda also states many issues of the 1971 War, including Prime Minister Indira Gandhi asking him whether the US would go to war against India. This occurred when the USS *Enterprise* reached the Malacca Strait. Admiral Nanda replied that he would order the captains of the Indian ships, that if they came across American vessels, “they should exchange identities and invite them for a drink”.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that both the Indian Navy and Indian Air Force planned separate attacks on Karachi port but there was little coordination among the three Services, with each fighting its own war.

The year 1987 witnessed the three Services undertaking operations in Sri Lanka. The operation christened “Op Pawan” brought out explicitly the need for jointness. The contingent sent by India was a peace-keeping force and was termed as the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF). On this occasion, the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) appointed the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) Southern Command as the Overall Force Commander (OFC). He had component Commanders from the three Services. Further, task forces from the Eastern Naval Command and Southern Air Command were subordinated to him. Initially, things seemed to be getting along fine till the Naval and Air Force Commands refused to allocate their forces to the component Commanders. They treated them like liaison officers and all allotment of effort was done by the respective Command Headquarters. The OFC lacked authority and was at best responsible for the Army component, with the other two Services cooperating but not coming under command. Thus, there was lack of command and control. This aspect added to other inconsistencies which made Op Pawan an operation which did not achieve its objectives.

The next conflict was “Op Vijay” which India fought against Pakistan at Kargil in 1999. The operations were fought to recapture areas which

Pakistan had occupied during the winter months. Essentially, it was an Army operation which needed air support. The Navy decided to concentrate the bulk of its ships on the western seaboard on the Arabian Sea. This did signal a naval challenge to Pakistan but the same was not postured politically. There were disagreements between the Army and the Air Force. The Army requested for air strikes which the Air Force stated needed political approval. Overall, the operations ended successfully with the capture of Tiger Hill and other important heights.<sup>8</sup>

The government in 1999 wanted to look seriously at this issue. Its constituted the Kargil Review Committee to look at the weaknesses which had an impact on national security. The committee came out with a comprehensive report which explained the infirmities in our system and also highlighted the weaknesses of our higher defence organisations. In response, the government established a Group of Ministers (GOM) to examine the weaknesses. The GOM constituted four task forces comprising eminent experts to analyse the issues and suggest suitable remedies. These task forces did their task with precision and submitted their reports in four months. The GOM submitted its report in one year. Wherein, Chapter VI of the Report on Management of Defence is extremely important. It clearly states that the functioning of the COSC has revealed serious weakness in its ability to provide single-point military advice to the government and resolve substantive inter-Service doctrinal, planning, policy and operational issues adequately. It strongly recommends the appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff which has not been implemented to date.<sup>9</sup> There have been the Naresh Chandra Committee and Shekatkar Committee that recommended joint Theatre Commands as also to start with a four-star General permanent COSC. The former Defence Minister often said it was on the way but it never happened. Of late, the Air Force has expressed its opposition to Joint Theatre Commands as it impacts the flexibility of the organisation.

## Way Ahead

The Indian armed forces have reached a *cul-de-sac* with regard to the appointment of a CDS. While the Army and Navy are in agreement, the Air Force is not prepared to accept the concept of Theatre Commands as also the appointment of the CDS. Wherever the concept has been accepted, it has been due to a political decision by the civil authority in power. In the US, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Act of 1986, which was a landmark Bill, altered the organisation and operation of the US Department of Defence and the three Services. The Bill was signed into law by the then US President Ronald Reagan in 1986. It was as a result of almost five years of effort and analysis by Congress and the Pentagon. It has resulted in improvement of jointness amongst the four Services.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, a political solution to this aspect needs to be worked out by the political authority in India. This should happen very soon as the pot has been boiling for over 18 years.

Without jointness, the Indian armed forces are fighting the last war. The implementation of such a move normally takes three to five years as the current 19 Commands have to be reduced to about seven. The execution would involve coordination which can easily be achieved. The main issue is political consensus which is gradually building up.

However, in the present battlefield milieu, there is a need for jointness to attain success. The Services would have their differences which the political authority must overcome by consensus. Any operation is a dependent task and normally involves more than one Service. To survive in the current environment, 'jointness' is imperative and must be executed with speed and military precision.

## Notes

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