

Reforming Command: The Politics and Practice of Theaterisation

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Services Air Differences on Theatre Commands at Ran Samvaad

On August 26-27, the longstanding debate over theaterisation of India's armed forces was thrust into the spotlight at the inaugural [Ran Samvaad](#) conclave—a high-level tri-service dialogue held at the Army War College, Mhow. The event, marking the first occasion where senior leaders of all three Services engaged in a structured public dialogue on theaterisation, carried added significance in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, which has sharpened questions about India's command arrangements and institutional preparedness for future conflicts. It also thrust into the open the deep differences within the Services over how best to structure the country's defense apparatus. Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh [articulated](#) the Air Force's position, stating, "Joint planning and coordination are essential, but joint structures

are not necessary at this stage.” In stark contrast, Navy Chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi [emphasized](#) that theaterisation remained the ultimate objective of all efforts toward ‘jointness’.

CDS General Anil Chauhan [acknowledged](#) these divergent views while emphasizing national interest as the guiding principle. “Differences among the Services are expected in such significant reforms,” he said. Emphasizing the achievement of a more open and frank basis for dialogue on theatre commands, he noted, “Our task is to examine these perspectives candidly and ensure that the final decisions strengthen India’s operational capability, not the preferences of any single service.” A series of joint doctrines to enhance interoperability among the services were also [released](#) at the conclave.

However, the debate at Ran Samvaad is only the latest episode in the five-year discourse on the theaterisation initiative. The [proposition](#) initially recommended by the Kargil Review Committee and, first formally championed by the late CDS General Bipin Rawat, seeks to reorganize India’s 17 service-specific commands—seven Army, seven Air Force, and three Navy—into a smaller number of Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs): a Northern Theatre Command focused on the China border, a Western Theatre Command for the Pakistan border, and a Maritime Theatre Command for maritime security. The stated objectives are to streamline decision-making, enhance jointness among the Services, optimize resource utilization, and strengthen India’s capability to conduct multi-domain operations along its two active fronts.

On paper, this aligns with the broader trend in modern militaries toward unified, theatre-centric command structures. However, despite broad consensus on the goals, differences within the military regarding the operational and structural details have persisted over the years—casting doubt on whether theaterisation will ultimately be realized, or remain an

aspirational reform stalled by institutional fault lines.

Air Force Resistance Exposes Deeper Institutional Divides

The debate over theaterisation is not just a standalone technical argument; it is a mirror into the deeper cognitive and institutional divides within the Indian armed forces, and by extension, the political framing of national security. Each service interprets both the threats and the institutional reforms through the lens of its own operational experience and organizational identity.

For the Air Force, the resistance is rooted in both principle and pragmatism. It argues that splitting limited aerial assets across multiple theatre commands risks reducing their strategic flexibility. Modern air power, unlike land or maritime forces, can be repositioned quickly to deliver strategic surprise, while also supporting multiple fronts as the situation demands. Operation Sindoor appeared to validate this logic: centralized control (at the service level) and the nimble redeployment of aircraft allowed the Air Force to sustain tempo across contingencies. From this perspective, theaterisation is not just unnecessary but potentially disruptive, creating layers of bureaucracy and limited resources at a time when speed and concentration of force are vital.

There is also a political dimension to this stance. The Air Force has, in recent years, been deployed most visibly in the [political narrative](#)—most notably during the Balakot airstrikes of 2019, which were repeatedly showcased in the run-up to national elections. This visibility may have given the service additional leverage in negotiating its institutional position. Having become a symbol of decisive, technology-driven power projection, the Air Force is less willing to cede control to joint structures in which it may not even have a command of its own, unlike the Navy, which stands to gain the leadership of a Maritime Theatre Command.

This alleged asymmetry of influence is just one of the many understated drivers of the current dissonance. The Air Force has always remained deeply averse to theatre commands because of its conviction that such a set up will allow the Army to direct air power in ways that are detrimental to the service as well as the pursuit of military objectives in a conflict. The Army's high-preference for effective (but potentially costly and wasteful) Close Air Support (CAS) missions during the early stage of conflict is one of many concrete bases for such deep apprehensions.

Operation Sindoor has only sharpened this bargaining dynamic further. While the government had publicly framed the operation as a triumph of jointness and coordination—"proof" that India's forces can act seamlessly—the Air Force can extend this public confirmation towards 'validating' its long-standing argument: that its centralized, [independent model already works](#). If joint planning and cross-service coordination could deliver success under the existing arrangements, why embark on a costly, cumbersome theatre transition? Particularly one that could take a decade or possibly more to complete, and may create turbulence in combat readiness during the transition period, and at a time when India faces heightened volatility along both the Pakistan and China borders.

Opponents of this argument are now likely to argue that the perceived success of Op Sindoor—a focused short conflict with a weaker adversary—should not guide debates on theaterisation, given that future wars could also be protracted and across multiple fronts. The latter hypothetical conflict necessitates statutes and systemic assurances, [rather](#) than personality alignment at the top (among service chiefs).

While the government has signaled intent by continuing to push the Services toward theaterisation, as many in uniform privately note, years of discussion without firm political ownership may have left the reforms adrift. Globally,

successful theaterisation—whether under Reagan in the United States or Xi Jinping in China—has depended on top political leadership driving the process to its conclusion. In India, responsibility has been left to the Services and the CDS, with the political leadership engaging mainly through rhetoric. The result is an unfinished reform process, marked more by institutional defensiveness than by coherent design. In this context, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's [comments](#) on jointness at Ran Samvaad does not help clarify the nature and direction of theaterisation that the civilian political leadership would like to bat for, "Friends, during Operation Sindoor, we also saw better coordination among the three-armed forces and their jointness. I believe that the jointness and integration of our forces played a major role in the success of Operation Sindoor. Therefore, I think we should also move forward in strengthening the joint strategic communication."

Strategic Shifts Undermine Theaterisation Momentum

The debate on the implications of Op Sindoor on the future of theatre commands is significantly skewed. The political rationale for linking the success of Op Sindoor with already-achieved and present nascent levels of 'integration' (without theater commands) has bolstered the Air Force's ability to scuttle genuine movement towards theaterisation. The Air Chief's comment has drawn significant ire and frustration from proponents of theaterisation. However, present trends and shifting strategic context is set to impede progress towards theaterisation further. The contemporary search for theaterisation began in 2017-18, following China's successful pivot towards this direction in 2015. In those years, India was prone to seek to match China's capabilities across the LAC in its search for relative parity. Furthermore, the strategic context was fairly stable, both vis-à-vis Pakistan as well as China, allowing the luxury to conceptualize and implement long-term based transition efforts. Both these conditions have significantly eroded by 2025, while the services are nowhere

nearer to a consensus now than in 2018-20. The struggle to understand and absorb the implications of recent wars (Russia-Ukraine especially), the level of collusion between China and Pakistan as well as Pakistan's re-entry as a military rival, are all playing a role in delaying consensus. Known to be somewhat frank and realistic, A P Singh's remarks—advocating better coordination over fixed theatre commands—are likely to resonate in the coming months and years.