

## **THEATRE COMMANDS BACK IN THE LIMELIGHT**

**BY**

**MAJ GEN HARSHA KAKAR (RETD)**

Theatre commands are back in the limelight. Multiple articles have appeared in the press recently, either justifying or seeking to delay its implementation. It does appear that services, other than the air force have been seeking its implementation, while the air force and its supporters have been criticizing the same.

The commencement of the debate was an article in CENJOWS by Rear Admiral Monty Khanna, presently posted in the Defence Services Staff College. He stated in his article that from his interactions with officers from all services, it emerges that the Air Force is responsible for delaying the establishment of theatre commands.

He has in various parts of the article, challenged the myth by which the air force is justifying its demands of keeping airpower centralized, rather than allocating it to operational commands. This is the reason, he claims, that other services have begun raising their own elements of air power, resulting in chipping away of the IAF roles. The latest in the case being the army, which has proposed purchase of six Apache helicopter gunships for the army aviation.

The second article was an op-ed supporting the air force view by Air Marshal Narayan Menon in The Tribune, wherein he states that the nation should first concentrate on making up its deficiencies and only then consider the creation of theatre commands. He justifies his argument on the Chinese and US models which commenced this approach only after obtaining self-sufficiency in defence production.

The third article was by Praveen Sawhney, who also validates the air force view and states that the air force has enough flexibility and hence should remain in its present form, under centralized control. His logic is based on three pillars. The first is that modern warfare would be fought on six battlefields, land, sea, air, cyber, space and electronic.

He believes that China would move ahead with non-contact war employing long range precision weapons instead of a land war. In this case, it would be the air force which would lead the war and not the army, an aspect which the army is unwilling to accept. He adds, the present strategy by military powers with nuclear weapons is military coercion. He quotes Op Parakram as an unsuccessful military coercion. He is of the belief that it was

India which sought peace after Doklam in Wuhan and terms it as a successful military coercion from the Chinese.

His second pillar is that theatre commanders would add another level between the service chiefs and the existing independent service commands. Finally, in the event of a two-front war, air power would need coordination from air HQs, rather than theatre commanders.

Clearly, there are two sides. The air force and its supporters on one and the rest on the other. There is no denying the fact that theatre commands, where all resources of a sector are employed in cohesion to maximum advantage, is the need of the hour, especially when we consider shortages in equipment profile.

As against the comments by Sawhney, once theatre commands are created, the existing single service commands may undergo a change. Some would be closed, while others amalgamated as part of theatre commands. The service chiefs, who presently remain 'force providers and force employers' would become only 'force providers', while theatre commanders would be 'force employers'.

While most quote the Chinese example, it is worth noting that the discussion for establishing a hotline between the two countries is held up on the issue of theatre commands. While China has one command deployed against India, we have three army and two air force commands against them. Thus, they seek the hotline between the two countries to terminate with the DGMO on the Indian side and their theatre command, while India claims it should terminate with the Eastern Army Command.

For the allocation of air power, all commanders are aware of the shortfall of resources. As compared to the US, which maintains expeditionary commands and hence cannot reallocate resources easily, India's theatre commands would be based within the nation and hence reallocation and redeployment is always feasible. After all, theatre commands would function as entities working for a common goal, not in isolation. Thus, air HQs would still be able to, depending on the operational situation, reallocate resources. Claiming that future wars would be dominated by airpower may be correct for the initial phases. Only employment of airpower or missiles from both sides is unlikely as it may lead to near equal destruction, but not subdue the other. Neither nation would seek to enhance the same to a nuclear level. Ultimately the battle would move into traditional domains involving the navy and the army. China would attempt to capture its claim lines and reduce the power of the Indian navy, if it seeks to force India onto the bargaining table.

If, out of the six spheres of operations, as stated by Sawhney, India is seeking to make joint commands to handle three, then keeping service specific commands, located at large distances from each other for the other traditional spheres is illogical. While the Indian armed forces may not have the advantage of a modernized armed force, akin to China, however it does have terrain advantages, which can only be exploited if all resources are employed in a coordinated manner and war is not considered to be service specific.

There is a mention of the air force being unwilling to accept the concept as it is likely to lose vacancies, while the army would gain. This is an immature thought, as the intention is to enhance war fighting capabilities of the nation, rather than seeking to maintain a rank structure. The appointment of theatre commanders would be a government decision and each one appointed would be capable of understanding multiple dimensions of conflict, his colour of uniform notwithstanding.

The entire argument misses out of the fact that in no nation have the pillars of the military accepted theatre commands on their own, as it has impinged on the power of service chiefs. In every case, it has been a push down by the government, which has understood the requirement of the same. In China, it was a direct order from Xi, while in the US it was the passage of the Goldwater Nichols act. In Canada, the amalgamation of the services was pushed through and resulted in either the sacking or resignation of seven senior officers, including the first CDS. Paul Hellyer, the then Canadian Defence Minister, has amply described the same in his book, 'Revolt of the Admirals'.

In India, based on the objection of the air force, the defence minister has sought the simplest way out, by stating that jointness emerge from bottoms up. Thus, she has pushed decision making on the subject into the dustbin. The government needs to take the issue by the horns and push a legislation down creating the same. Unless it does so, the armed forces would continue to operate in separate silos, considering operations in their independent domain, rather than maximising war potential.

**Disclaimer:** Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.