



# **DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

## **TOPIC**

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**INDIA'S AIR POWER AND THEATRE  
COMMANDS: PREPARING INDIA FOR  
FUTURE**

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## INDIA'S AIR POWER AND THEATRE COMMANDS: PREPARING INDIA FOR FUTURE

### Context

- The debate over **theatre commands** gained renewed attention following recent conflicts and discussions on **air-power reforms**, with the IAF urging a measured approach to integration without disrupting proven operational structures.

### About Indian Armed Forces & Air Power

- **India's armed forces** comprise the **Army, Navy and Air Force**, supported by increasingly important domains such as **space, cyber and information warfare**.
- The **Indian Air Force (IAF)** plays a critical role in protecting Indian airspace, conducting offensive operations, supporting ground forces and enabling strategic mobility.
- A distinctive feature of the IAF's doctrine is its preference for **centralised control** and operational flexibility.
  - ♦ Permanent allocation of IAF to geographical theatre commands **could reduce flexibility** and fragment scarce combat resources since air assets are limited and can be rapidly redeployed.
- IAF has served India well in operations involving Pakistan, including Balakot (2019) and later contingencies.
- However, a potential conflict with China presents a different challenge due to the Himalayan terrain, larger geographical theatre, greater military capacity and the possibility of simultaneous contingencies.

### Importance of Air Power in Modern Warfare

- Modern air power remains essential, but **recent wars** demonstrate that air superiority alone does not guarantee victory.
  - ♦ Ukraine has highlighted the importance of integrated air defence.
  - ♦ Dominance of the skies may not translate automatically into political or military success.
  - ♦ Modern warfare is increasingly shaped by **cost asymmetry**. Low-cost drones can force defenders to expend expensive interceptors.
- Thus, future air power needs to be integrated with **land, maritime, cyber, space and intelligence capabilities** rather than viewed as an independent war-winning instrument.

### Need of Theatre Commands for India's Air Power

- The proposed **Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs)** seek to bring forces from different services **under unified operational structures** for specific geographical areas.
  - ♦ Their **primary objective** is to improve joint planning, faster decision-making and coordinated employment of military capabilities.
- For India's air power, theatre commands could address the persistent jointness deficit.
  - ♦ The experience of Kargil and the continuing strategic challenge along the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** underline the importance of integrated planning between air and land forces.
- Recently, the Air Chief Marshal has reinforced the need for careful, evolutionary reform rather than rushed restructuring.
  - ♦ Therefore, **theatre-isation** should strengthen, not dilute the IAF's ability to deploy assets across theatres.

### Key Benefits & Significance

- **Unity of Command:** A single operational commander can take timely decisions during a crisis.
- **Enhanced Jointness:** The Army, Navy and Air Force can plan and train together in peacetime.
- **Optimal Resource Utilisation:** Intelligence, logistics and surveillance assets can be shared more effectively.

- **Faster Response:** Established command arrangements can reduce delays caused by inter-service consultation.
- **Multi-domain Warfare Readiness:** Theatre structures can better integrate cyber, space and information capabilities.
  - ♦ Most importantly, joint structures could ensure that India's limited high-value assets are allocated according to national priorities during simultaneous crises.

#### Countries with theatre/joint command structures

- **United States:** Geographic and functional **Unified Combatant Commands**; Air Force assets operate within joint command arrangements while retaining service-level organisation.
- **China:** Five PLA Theatre Commands; PLA Air Force and other services are integrated into theatre-level operations.
- **Russia:** Joint Strategic Commands / military districts with joint operational roles; Aerospace forces are coordinated with broader joint military structures.
- **Israel:** Highly integrated operational command and joint planning system; Air power is centrally controlled and closely integrated with national operations.

#### Related Issues & Concerns

- Theatre-isation is **not a risk-free reform**. The foremost concern is the **possible fragmentation of air assets**, which could undermine centralised control and flexibility.
  - ♦ India faces institutional challenges involving command relationships, service cultures, rank equivalence and career progression.
- Further, structural reorganisation alone cannot create jointness. A theatre command may merely become another administrative layer without common doctrine, joint training, interoperable communications and integrated logistics.
- The **China challenge** makes these concerns particularly significant. Mountain warfare, dispersed infrastructure and the need for rapid force concentration require both unity of command and operational flexibility.

#### Way Forward: Overcoming Future Challenges

- India should adopt a **gradual and evidence-based approach** to theatre-isation.
- It should strengthen peacetime joint planning, training and exercises before undertaking irreversible structural changes.
- Theatre command designs must preserve the IAF's ability to centrally allocate and rapidly redeploy air assets based on national priorities.
- India should invest in integrated air and missile defence, affordable counter-drone systems, resilient airbases and indigenous surveillance capabilities to address the changing economics of warfare.
- Political leadership needs to provide **clear strategic direction** with objectives to build a military capable of fighting jointly while retaining the flexibility required for India's unique geography and threat environment.

Source: TH

#### Daily Mains Practice Question

- [Q] Critically examine the need for integrated theatre commands in India. How can India reconcile the Indian Air Force's requirement for operational flexibility with the need for greater jointness to prepare for future conflicts?

