

THEATRE COMMAND – DEFENCE

NEWS: Recently, the **Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)** emphasized the creation of **Integrated Theatre Commands (ITC)** marking a transformational shift in India's military structure.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Overview of Integrated Theatre Commands (ITC)

- ITCs are a **modern military organizational strategy** adopted globally to enhance joint operations among the Army, Navy, and Air Force.
- The core idea is to unify all three services under a **single command structure** to improve operational efficiency, resource sharing, and rapid response.
- ITCs enable **integrated planning, execution, and logistics**, reducing duplication and improving synergy across services.

India's Rationale for ITC

- India's ITC aims to **strengthen defense preparedness** on multiple fronts:
 - **Northern borders** with China and Pakistan.
 - **Maritime security** in the Indo-Pacific region, which is crucial given China's naval expansion.
- The initiative reflects a **shift from service-centric operations to jointness**, ensuring quicker, cohesive military responses to evolving threats.
- The 2016 **Shekatkar Committee recommended three theatre commands** focused on the North, West, and South.
- In 2024, India marked a milestone by establishing its first tri-service **logistics base in Mumbai**, exemplifying growing jointness.

TRIDENT CLUSTERS

Facing our traditional adversaries and the Indian Ocean Region, the three theatre commands have us covered

PAKISTAN-CENTRIC WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND

From Indira Col on Saltoro Ridge in the Siachen Glacier to Gujarat

HQ in Jaipur

MARITIME COMMAND

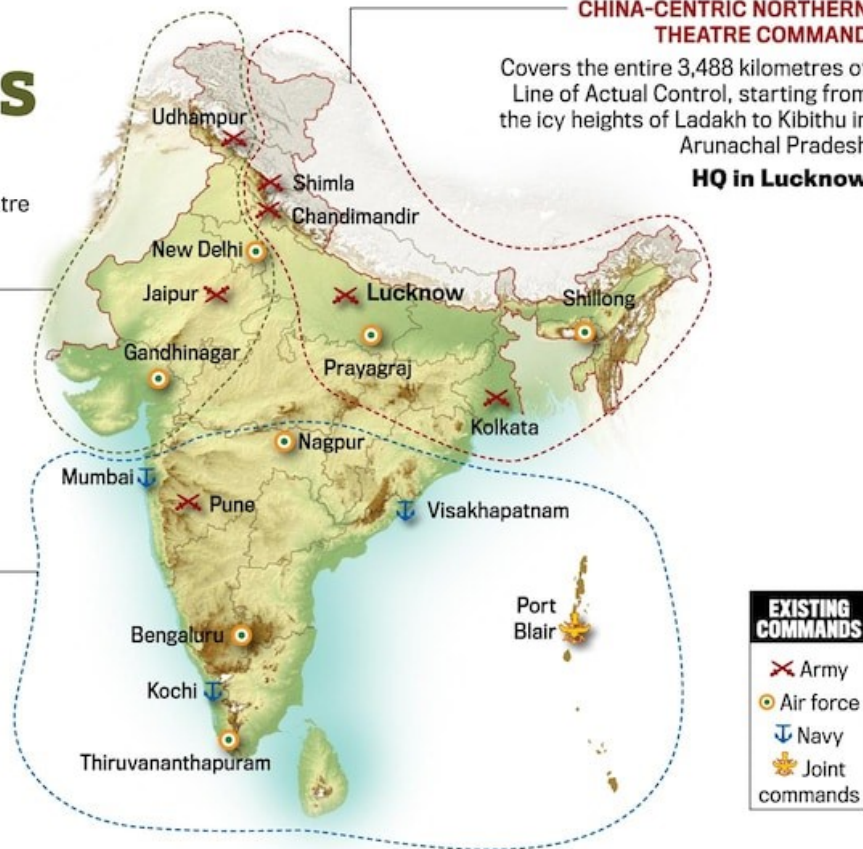
Responsible for India's coastline of 7,516 km, as well as the Indian Ocean Region

HQ in Karwar, Karnataka

CHINA-CENTRIC NORTHERN THEATRE COMMAND

Covers the entire 3,488 kilometres of Line of Actual Control, starting from the icy heights of Ladakh to Kibithu in Arunachal Pradesh

HQ in Lucknow



Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

Current Indian Armed Forces Command Structure

- India presently functions through **17 separate single-service commands**:
 - Army**: 7 commands (Northern, Eastern, Southern, Western, Central, South-Western, ARTRAC)
 - Air Force**: 7 commands (Western, Eastern, Southern, South-Western, Central, Maintenance, Training)
 - Navy**: 3 commands (Western, Eastern, Southern)
- Each command is led by a **4-star officer** from their respective service.
- This leads to **resource duplication, coordination delays, and operational fragmentation**, especially during joint operations.

ITC Framework and Existing Tri-Service Commands

- ITC proposes replacing these 17 commands with **fewer integrated commands**, each headed by a **single commander with authority over all three services**.
- Existing tri-service commands:
 - Strategic Forces Command (SFC)**: Manages India's nuclear deterrent.
 - Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)**: Oversees strategic maritime areas including the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia.

- **Proposed Theatre Commands:**
 - **Northern Theatre Command (HQ: Lucknow):** Covers borders with China in Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh.
 - **Western Theatre Command (HQ: Jaipur):** Focuses on Pakistan border regions including Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan.
 - **Maritime Theatre Command (HQ: Thiruvananthapuram):** Responsible for Indian Ocean Region and Andaman Sea.

Why India Needs Theatre Commands

- **Combat Efficiency:** A single theatre commander enables **faster, unified decision-making** and coordinated battlefield operations.
- **Resource Optimization:** Reduces unnecessary duplication in logistics, infrastructure, and personnel deployment.
- **Interoperability:** Ensures seamless communication and operational synergy across Army, Navy, and Air Force units.
- **Readiness for Modern Warfare:** Facilitates integrated use of **space, cyber, electronic warfare, and special forces** capabilities.
- **Learning from Past:** The 1999 Kargil conflict exposed coordination gaps, highlighted by the Kargil Review Committee, necessitating joint commands.

Key Issues and Challenges

- **Inter-Service Coordination:** Aligning differing doctrines and operational cultures of Army, Navy, and Air Force remains a complex task.
- **Structural and Command Hierarchy:** The role of new four-star theatre commanders may overlap or conflict with existing service chiefs, creating potential command ambiguities.
- **Transition Complexities:** Moving from 17 single-service commands to integrated theatre commands requires substantial restructuring and cultural change.
- **Resource Allocation:** Limited air assets and logistics may be strained across multiple theatres, risking operational bottlenecks.
- **Infrastructure Gaps:** Many new command headquarters are under development and not yet fully operational.
- **Geopolitical Challenges:** The Northern Theatre must effectively counter China's operational Western Theatre Command (active since 2016). Similarly, the Western Theatre faces ongoing Pakistan-related threats including terrorism and cross-border incursions.
- **Policy and Implementation Delays:** Government approvals and parliamentary scrutiny have slowed the ITC rollout; the Standing Committee on Defence calls for more deliberations.

Global Examples of Theatre Commands

- **United States:**
 - Operates Unified Combatant Commands dividing global military operations geographically and functionally.
 - Examples include **INDOPACOM (Indo-Pacific Command)**, **CENTCOM (Central Command)**, and **EUCOM (European Command)**.
 - Commands integrate assets across Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Space Force.
- **China:**
 - Reorganized in 2016 into five theatre commands (Western, Eastern, Southern, Northern, Central).
 - Each focuses on specific regional security priorities, e.g., Western Command for the India border, Eastern Command for Taiwan.
- **Russia:**
 - Uses four military districts (Western, Southern, Central, Eastern) functioning as theatre commands.
 - Integrates land, air, and naval forces for strategic defense.
- **United Kingdom & France:**
 - UK's **Joint Forces Command** oversees cyber, intelligence, and logistics.
 - France's **Commandement des Opérations Spéciales** unifies special forces across services.

Conclusion

- The creation of Integrated Theatre Commands represents a **paradigm shift in Indian military doctrine**.
- Moving beyond structural reorganization, it fosters:
 - **Greater jointness and synergy**
 - **Operational efficiency**
 - **Strategic clarity in planning and execution**
- This reform is essential for **modernizing India's defense forces**, ensuring they remain **ready, relevant, and resilient** amid rapidly evolving regional and global security challenges.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/indian-armed-forces-restructuring-theatre-commanders-to-look-after-force-application-service-chiefs-force-generation/article69609933.ece>