

GETTING INDIA'S MILITARY CONVERGENCE FORMULA RIGHT

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The Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat's recent description of [the Indian Air Force \(IAF\) as a supporting arm](#) — in an interview on July 2 — and the IAF chief Air Chief Marshal R.K.S. Bhadauria's rebuttal, is the newest bump in the turbulent journey marking the reorganisation process of the armed forces. Unfortunately, this bump, probably caused by misinterpretation of an oversimplification by the Chief of Defence Staff, comes just when the process appears to be touching down after being airborne for long. Whatever the cause, the differences do not speak well of the intellectual underpinnings of the reorganisation process. Is there a problem with air power? What about the IAF warning against splitting it into 'penny packets'? Is air power an adjunct?

Armies and navies will see air power as an adjunct, history being the reason. Analysing the experience of the United States, the greatest exponent of air power in history, the air power theorist Tami Davis Biddle wrote in 2019 that 'aerial bombing cannot control the ground. It is fundamentally a coercive activity in which an attacker seeks to structure the enemy's incentives — using threats and actions to shape and constrain the enemy's options, both perceived and real. It is an important and much-utilized military instrument for both deterrence and compellence. However, its ability to produce results varies, and students of strategy must understand the circumstances under which it is more or less likely to achieve particular results or political ends' (<https://bit.ly/3iHHRza>). Holding and controlling land or water is essential in conflict. From Vietnam to Afghanistan, air power failed to deliver the promised results to the U.S. But everyone acknowledges how greatly air power can aid victories though.

India fully prepared to meet security challenges, says Air Chief Marshal Bhadauria

Media reports suggest that counting even ageing aircraft, the IAF is 25% short on fighter squadrons. A pan service shortage of about 400 pilots, almost 10% of their authorised strength, further aggravates this. Therefore, the IAF has a point when it warns against splitting assets, for, there may be nothing much to split. Whether now, or in any future joint arrangement, the service chief is responsible for the operational availability of assets. He alone will be blamed for failures. So he must protest with all his might. Vulnerabilities should be known to all stakeholders. When the U.S. Navy faced a budget cut in 2015, Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations told the Senate that '(if the budget gets cut) more ships and aircraft (will be) out of action when in battle, more sailors, Marines and merchant mariners (will be) killed, and (there will be) less credibility, to deter adversaries and to assure allies in the future' (<https://bit.ly/2TxL1TJ>). But shortage alone is not at the core of the IAF's objections. It is also the prospect of operational plans for the IAF being made outside the service.

A common understanding of the nuances of military air power is the key. Towards this, it has to be accepted that others too understand air power. The 67-year-old naval air arm figures among the top 10 air forces of the world. With the experience of operating almost every kind of aircraft the IAF operates, and with the benefits of the operational wisdom borne of the harsh integrity of the supremely tough aircraft carrier and other small deck operations, the naval leadership understands air power. This applies to the Indian Army too, in its own way. Confidence needs to be developed that rightly staffed apex joint organisations can draw up professional operational plans for air power. This will need some effort in the short term towards enhancing professional military education though, at the staff level.

With dwindling budgets, a steadily deteriorating security situation and the march of technology, the armed forces understand the need to synergise. But natural human faults interfere. For instance, different services do not co-exist well where they are colocated. Bitter fights over land, buildings, facilities, etc. mar optimal operational synergising. Then there is the issue of giving each other the best, or of wanting to be with each other. The Andaman and Nicobar Command suffered from the lack of a substantial operational charter, and the services not positioning appropriate personnel or resources there. Moreover, as a joint tenure did not benefit career, no one strove for it. The U.S., when faced with the same problem, made joint tenures mandatory for promotions. Steamrolling with decrees is useful in such areas.

The problem now with the military synergy plan

Major reorganisations must strictly follow the sequence of written concepts, their refinement through consultation, simulation or table top war gaming, field evaluation and final analysis before implementation. This would help address command and control, asset adequacy, individual service roles, operational planning under new circumstances and the adequacy of joint structures. Who gets to lead what also matters. The Western Command between the Indian Army and the IAF, the Northern Command with the Indian Army, Maritime Command with the Indian Navy and the Air Defence Command with the IAF may be an acceptable formula.

As we hurtle towards inevitable reorganisation, some specifics are required. The first is the need for a comprehensive National Security Strategy to guide the services develop capacities required in their respective domains. The second is the need to transform professional education and inter-service employment to nurture genuine respect for others. The third is that the armed forces must resolve their differences among themselves, as the politicians or bureaucrats cannot do it. The fourth is to ensure good quality staff, in adequate numbers, at apex joint organisations, to reassure individual services and those in the field that they are in safe hands. The fifth is the acceptance of the fact that what works for other countries need not work for us. We may need tailor-made solutions which may need more genuine thinking. For genuine military jointness, a genuine convergence of minds is critical. Decrees have limitations.

Commodore G. Prakash, a Nau Sena Medal recipient, served the Indian Navy for 35 years. He is a specialist in aviation and anti-submarine warfare

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