

Integrated Theatre Commands – UPSC Notes

The Indian Government is working towards forming integrated theatre commands as part of reforms carried out in the military after the formation of the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Integrated Theatre Commands (ITC) is an integrated force that is assigned a specific geographical theatre and can operate independently.

What are Integrated Theatre Commands?

An integrated theatre command envisages a unified command of the three Services, under a single commander, for geographical theatres (areas) that are of strategic and security concern.

- The commander of such a force will bear all resources at his disposal, from the Army, the Navy and the Indian Air Force, with harmonious efficacy.
- The commander of an integrated theatre will not be answerable to individual Services and will have the freedom to equip, train and exercise his command to make it a cohesive fighting force capable of attaining assigned targets.
- This is different from the current model followed by the military in India, wherein service-specific commands are there. The Indian Army, Navy and the Air Force have their own commands all across India.
- In the event of a war, each of the Service Chief of Staff will control the operations of his Service through individual commands, while they operate jointly.
- Ideally, considering India's geographic characteristics, the largest ITC configurations could be two theatres - Continental and Maritime.
- This system aims to put the resources of the three Services at the disposal of the **theatre commander**, keeping in mind the tasks assigned to him, and thereafter leaves him free to train his command to make it a cohesive fighting force capable of achieving its designated charter in the shortest possible timeframe.
- The Theatre Commander would be solely responsible for integrated planning and coordinated application.

How many commands are there currently?

- The Indian armed forces currently have seventeen commands, including seven each for the Army and the Air Force and three for the Navy.
- Every command is headed by a 4-star rank military officer.
- Coordination of operations is performed at the Service Headquarters level through the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), which is headed by the senior-most Service Chief who is designated as Chairman, COSC.
 - The chairman of the COSC is the Service chief for his Service and also the COSC chairman.

The following table gives the various commands of the military forces:

Service	Command
Army	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Northern2. Eastern3. Southern4. Western5. Central6. South-western7. Army Training Command (ARTRAC)
Navy	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Western2. Eastern3. Southern
Air Force	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Western2. Eastern3. Southern4. South-western5. Central6. Training

	7. Maintenance
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- Additionally, there are **two tri-service commands** currently:
 - Strategic Forces Command (SFC)
 - Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)
- The tri-services commands are headed by a rotation by officers from the 3 Services.
- **The ANC is an integrated theatre command, currently the only one in India.**
 - It was created in 2001 to protect India's strategic interests in Southeast Asia and the Strait of Malacca by enhancing the rapid deployment of military assets in the islands.
 - It is based in Port Blair.
- The SFC handles the delivery and operational control of the country's nuclear assets.
 - This is considered to be an integrated functional command and not an integrated theatre command, since it has no specific geographic responsibility and a designated role.
 - SFC was created in 2003.
- There are demands for similar functional commands such as aerospace, cyber and Special Operations commands.

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

In 2019, the government created the post of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to act as the principal point of contact between the tri-services and the executive leadership of the country. Following his appointment, several experts have noted that the development of integrated theatre commands, sometimes also referred to as tri-service combatant commands, was warranted.

Need for Integrated Theatre Command

The Shekatkar Committee had recommended the formation of three integrated theatre commands namely, western for the Pakistan border, northern for the China border and southern for the maritime role. The Kargil Review Committee (1999), which was set up after the end of the Kargil War, also recommended the creation of joint theatre commands.

- An integrated theatre command is one that enables the pooling of resources of all three services under a single commander, towards securing a particular geographical area.
- A military commander in charge of a joint command will have the resources of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force at his disposal in the face of a national security threat.
- The commander can also carry out joint training while benefiting from the logistics of all three services.
- The concept of an integrated theatre command originated in the US. The US has eleven unified commands. In 2016, China, emulating the US, reorganised its military into five joint theatre commands.
- Given that India has the fourth-largest military in the world, with each service acting independent of the other, the creation of integrated theatre commands is the need of the hour.
- Integrated Theatres will also optimise resource utilisation and would certainly involve savings that can be utilised for force modernisation.

Integrated Theatre Command Challenges

Some of the challenges faced in the implementation of the integrated theatre commands are discussed below.

- Structure of command: Who will report to who within the tri-services and joint theatre command configurations, and who will have operational command over personnel and machinery, service chiefs or theatre commanders is a question to be pondered over.
- Shortage of resources within the Indian Air Force (IAF): The IAF has only 31 operational squadrons against the sanctioned strength of 42. This would make it difficult for the IAF to permanently station assets in a particular command with territorial boundaries.
- Inter-services competition: Each service zealously oversees its own assets and strives for a greater share of the defence budget and influence, this might prove to be an obstacle in creating synergy among the services.
- Limited experience: India's lack of enough experience in integrated theatre commands will mean that as such commands evolve, some course corrections might be required.

Way Forward

- The Indian military of the 21st century must be equipped to cope with the challenges with which it is likely to be confronted, not only with hardware and manpower of the desired quantity and

quality but equally with structures that will exploit these capabilities in the most efficient and economical way.

- Integrated force development, along with operations under a unified command, is the way forward.
- Integrated Theatre Commands are by no means a panacea for all our military shortcomings. But they are an important edifice in the overall organisational structure that seeks to improve, to bring clarity and efficiency in our military functioning.

