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# Theaterisation of Indian Military

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## OVERVIEW

Faced with a few new and some long term threats, Indian military is slowly moving towards integration and consolidation of its resources into a combined arms structure. This monograph is a short introduction to background, steps taken and current status.

## BACKGROUND

India has fought a number of full scale wars and limited conflicts since independence in 1947:

1. **Pakistan.** 1947, 1965, 1971, 1984, 1999. Additionally, borders between the two countries have stayed hot since 1947 with multiple skirmishes, cross-border raids, artillery duels and muslim terrorist attacks abetted by Pakistan. The changes in Pakistani regimes have not brought about any meaningful changes in their policies with respect to India and it maintains a permanently hostile posture without any possibility of any change in the foreseeable future.
2. **China.** 1962, 1967, 1987, 2020. Although India and China have fought only one major war in 1962, the Indo-Tibet borders have largely remained tense but quiet apart from a few incidents every now and then. The recent rise in Chinese expansionism has changed the equation, perhaps permanently. Additionally, the all encompassing Pak-China alliance is considered to be a factor for a possible two-front war in which both countries may pool their resources in a war against India.
3. **LTTE (Sri Lanka):** IPKF mission From 1987 till 1990
4. **Portugal:** Over Goa in 1961.
5. **Maldives:** 1988, Limited intervention.

India sees China and Pakistan as the major threats and most of military doctrine and spending reflects that. Indian military interventions in neighbouring countries are pretty rare, but not impossible in future. In addition, there are islamic and Marxist terrorist activities in certain parts which are usually dealt with by central paramilitary forces like CRPF and state police forces. It's pertinent to know that many of these terrorist groups are financed and supported by China and Pakistan.

So any changes in Indian military structure has to take following threats into considerations:

1. An all out two-front war where India may have to fight China and Pakistan at the same time.
2. Limited border conflicts like Kargil which may go on for a few days with either of the two adversaries.

3. Possibility of civil unrest and sabotage by islamic and communist groups mentioned earlier.
4. Maintaining Indian influence & interests in Indian sub-continent and neighbouring regions.

## CURRENT STRUCTURE OF ARMED FORCES

Indian armed forces have largely followed the British colonial era customs and organisational structure for the most part. There have been very few organisational level changes since 1947 and this transition into a combined arms (or Integrated Battle Groups in local nomenclature) is going to be the biggest such change in history.

Without going in to details, following are the current commands of Indian armed forces in 2022-23:

### INDIAN ARMY

NO.	COMMAND	UNITS
1.	Central Command	1 Division: 6th Mountain Division
2.	Eastern Command	4 Corps: III, IV, XXXIII and XVII
3.	Southern Command	2 Corps: XII & XXI and 1 Division: 41st Artillery Division
4.	Western Command	3 Corps: II , IX & XI and 1 Division: 40th Artillery Division
5.	Northern Command	3 Corps: XIV, XV & XVI
6.	South Western Command	2 Corps: I & X and 1 Division: 42nd Artillery Division
7	Training Command	

TABLE : Indian Army Commands

Its sanctioned strength is 50,000 officers and 12,15,000 personnel. There are around 9,60,000 reserves of which 3,00,00 are first line.

Each command is led by a Lt General and usually has 2-3 Divisions plus a few independent units. These are classified as Pivot, Strike and newest Mountain Corps depending upon their intended role during a war.

The divisions are commanded by a Major General and classified according to their equipment and role into Infantry, Artillery and Armour. Specialised Mountain Infantry divisions are meant for operations in Himalayan regions facing China and Pakistan. The infantry divisions usually have 2-3 infantry brigades and 1 artillery brigade. Each infantry brigade usually has 3 infantry battalions plus some support units. Battalions are commanded by a Colonel and have around 900 troops. The battalions are further populated by Companies commanded by a Major or sometimes a Lt Colonel.

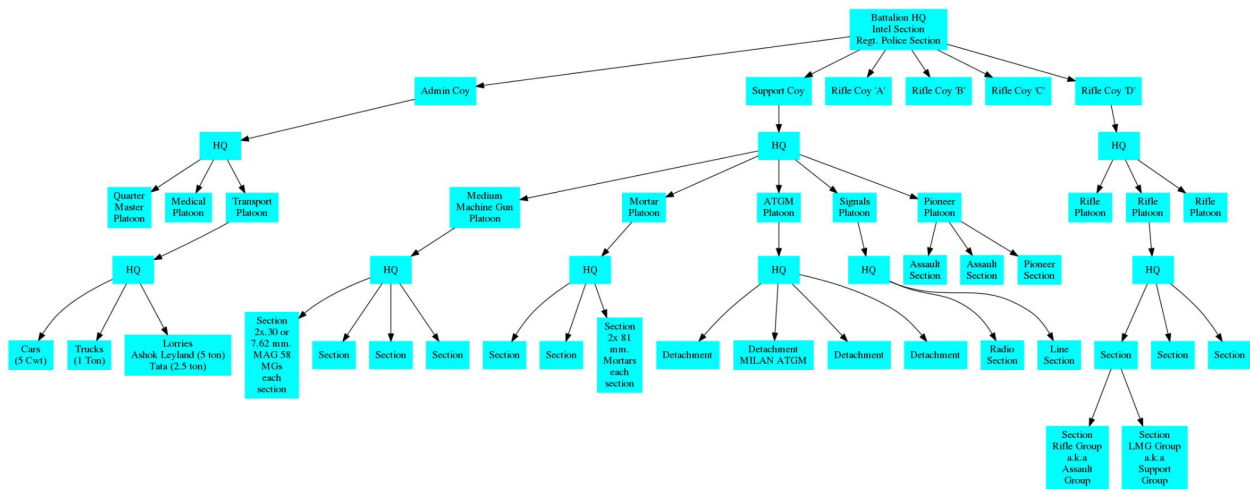


IMAGE: Indian Army Infantry Battalion ORBAT<sup>1</sup>

## RAPIDS

There is another type of division called RAPID (Reorganized Plains Infantry Division) which have so far been deployed on western front against Pakistan. As evident from the name, these are essentially Mechanised Infantry Divisions with following ORBAT:

1. 1 Armoured Brigade with 2 armoured regiments and 2 Mechanised Infantry regiments.
2. 2 Infantry Brigades, motorised or mechanised.
3. 1 Recon & Support Battalion

RAPIDs are considered to be a pivotal element in Indian Cold Start Doctrine (CSD). It envisages quick punitive military action against Pakistan by occupying shallow expanses of their territory. This is specifically meant to avoid the war crossing nuclear threshold by not threatening

<sup>1</sup> Outline Organisation Structure of a Standard Infantry Battalion  
<https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/ARMY/images/Corps/TOE/infantry3.jpg>

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immediate dismemberment or destruction of Pakistan as a nation. Although with increased nuclear saber rattling by Pakistan and changing threat profile, there may be some rethink in this policy.

Indian Armoured units are organised by Regiments of which there are 68-70 in total. Each regiment has 45-48 tanks in 3 Sabre Squadron of 14-15 tanks each. 4 Troops of 3 tanks each make a squadron.

Indian artillery covers nearly all types of tube and rocket artillery assets including cruise missiles, tactical ballistic missiles as well as Surveillance and Target Acquisition (SATA) assets . All the Strike Corps have at least 1 Artillery Division and most divisions have one artillery brigade.

### INTEGRATED BATTLE GROUPS

IBGs are the most recent development for a combined arms structure in Indian Army, so little information is available. These are headed by a Major General (or perhaps a Brigadier) and supposed to be something in between a brigade and a division with a total strength of around 5000 with troops belonging to Infantry, Artillery, Armoured, Engineers, Signals, Air Defence, and others. As per plans, there will be a total of 12 IBGs with 4 under IX Corps, 5 under XXXIII Corps and 3 under XVII Corps, with more to come in future. <sup>2</sup> Role of Army Aviation is not fully clear yet, but it's likely to be an integral element..

### **INDIAN AIR FORCE**

Although the sanctioned strength of IAF is 42 fighter squadrons, a number of issues have kept the numbers far below the sanctioned strength. This has been one of major issues which may throw a spanner in transition to theater command structure.

<b>NO.</b>	<b>COMMAND</b>	<b>UNITS</b>
1.	Central Air Command	7 fighter squadrons 1 transport squadron 2 helicopter squadrons. 1 training unit.
2.	Eastern Air Command	4 fighter squadrons 3 transport squadron 8 helicopter squadrons.
3.	Southern Air Command	3 fighter squadrons 1 transport squadron 3 helicopter squadrons.

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<sup>2</sup> Offensive defence: Army to ready its first set of new battle groups by September end:  
<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/aug/09/offensive-defence-army-to-ready-its-first-set-of-new-battle-groups-by-september-end-2342411.html>

4.	Western Air Command	10 fighter squadrons 4 transport squadron 8 helicopter squadrons 1 Attack helicopter squadron.
5.	Training Command	
6.	Maintenance Command	9 Base Repair Depots

TABLE : Indian Air Force Commands

Each command is led by an Air Marshal. The squadrons are organised into Wings which usually have 2-3 squadrons plus some support units. Each fighter squadron has 18 aircraft led by a Wing Commander.

Sanctioned strength is nearly 12,500 officers and 1,42,600 airmen

## INDIAN NAVY

Indian Navy has following 3 operational Commands:

NO.	COMMAND	UNITS
1.	Western Naval Command	18 major ports, depots, support & other units on western coast.
2.	Southern Naval Command	18 major ports, depots, support & other units on western coast. Training command
3.	Eastern Naval Command	19 major ports, depots, support & other units on western coast.

TABLE: Indian Navy Commands

Navy has approved a strength of around 12,000 officers and 72,000 sailors. This manpower is spread across all sailors, naval aviators as well as security personnel including Marcos (Marine Commandos).

Hampered by low budget, IN has managed to raise and maintain a fairly respectable fleet consisting of 2 aircraft carriers, 11 destroyers, 13 frigates, 23 corvettes and multiple types of other ships. Submarine fleet includes 16 diesel-electric attack submarines and 2 SSBNs.

## PARAMILITARY FORCES

In addition to these, Indian security apparatus consists of various paramilitary forces, most of which are under the Ministry of Home Affairs instead of the Ministry of Defence. These include

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CRPF<sup>3</sup> (3,20,00 personnel), CISF<sup>4</sup> (1,63,613 personnel), ITBP<sup>5</sup> (meant for security at Indo-Tibet border, 1,00,000 personnel) and BSF<sup>6</sup> (2,70,00 personnel). These are usually lightly armed and not meant for front line combat. Although some forces like BSF and ITBP work with the army in sensitive border areas.

So far, there has been no indication of their assimilation into any integrated command.

## INTEGRATED COMMANDS

Although theater commands (or joint commands) have been a long standing proposition, the process of setting them up has been a contentious issue. So far, India has set up following tri-service commands listed below. Apart from AFSOD led by a Major General, all are headed by officers with rank of Lt General or equivalent in Air Force and Navy:

### 1. Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) in 2001.

ANC seems to be a unique military command with primary focus on maritime roles in Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea region. It looks over some vital trade routes including Malacca and Singapore straits.<sup>7</sup> Its arsenal includes:

- 1 amphibious infantry brigade (-1 battalion) and 1 Territorial Army battalion.<sup>8</sup>
- At least 2 corvettes, 2 patrol vessels, 4 landing ships and a few more small patrol and surveillance platforms.
- Multiple aircraft including Dornier, P8I and UAVs. Some are not under ANC's direct command, but are assigned from Air Force and Navy.

It is very likely that this command will see the induction of more platforms and perhaps coastal missile batteries in near future.

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<sup>3</sup> बल की संगठनात्मक संरचना <https://crpf.gov.in/org-structure-hi.htm>

<sup>4</sup> About CISF <https://www.cisf.gov.in/cisfeng/about-us/#:~:text=CISF%20is%20an%20armed%20force,2021>.

<sup>5</sup> Origin of ITBP, the 'Himveers' and National Security [https://itbp.nic.in/Home/history\\_role](https://itbp.nic.in/Home/history_role)

<sup>6</sup> ROLE OF BSF <https://bsf.gov.in/role.html>

<sup>7</sup> Andaman and Nicobar to become a major amphibious warfare base :

<https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-andaman-and-nicobar-to-become-a-major-amphibious-warfare-base-1345123>

<sup>8</sup> Interview | Commander in Chief Andaman and Nicobar Command, Vice Admiral Bimal Verma AVSM, ADC: <https://forceindia.net/interview/commander-chief-andaman-nicobar-command-vice-admiral-bimal-verma-av-sm-adc/>





IMAGE: ANC Area of operations<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Strategic Forces Command (SFC) in 2003.

As far as SFC is concerned, it is primarily a part of the Indian nuclear weapons program responsible for delivery of nuclear warheads after authorisation from India's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA).

## 3. Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD) in 2018.

AFSOD gets its personnel from special operation units from Air Force (Garud), Army (Para SF) and Navy (Marocs). Going by rank of the commander (Major General or equivalent rank), it is supposedly a Division level unit for now but may change into a full tri-service command in near future.

## 4. Defence Cyber Agency (DCyA) in 2019

<sup>9</sup> Strategic Importance of Andaman and Nicobar Command- A Revaluation  
<https://dras.in/strategic-importance-of-andaman-and-nicobar-command-a-revaluation/>

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DCyA is meant to consolidate the existing cyber warfare resources of Indian armed forces as well as raise some new capabilities along with participation from civilian agencies such as DRDO. It will have embedded cells in all major HQs for cyber security too.<sup>10</sup>

### **5. Defence Space Agency (DSA) in 2018**

DSA is meant to consolidate Indian resources in space warfare, Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) and Communication Intelligence (COMINT).<sup>11</sup> It gets support from a few civilian agencies like newly setup Defence Space Research Agency (DSRO).<sup>12</sup> The test of Indian ASAT missile in March 2019 was a major step in this direction.

### **6. Rocket Force (Upcoming)**

Indian armed forces may see the addition of a new dedicated rocket force pretty soon. It is going to be a separate command armed with non-nuclear tactical missiles like Brahmos, Prahaar, Pralay, Nirbhay and others which may get inducted in numbers. Strategic missiles like Agni and SLBMs will likely be under a different command. It is essential to prevent ambiguity about nuclear weapons as is the case with the Chinese PLA Rocket Force.<sup>13,14</sup>

## **INTEGRATED THEATER COMMANDS**

Integrated Defence Staff (setup in 2001) was the first real step in creation of a joint theater command (TC) structure, but further progress has been slow and full of hurdles. The organisation comprises officers from Army, Navy Air Force, MoD, MoF, MEA and DRDO.<sup>15</sup> All the commands mentioned in the previous section function under the IDS and the new tri-service theater command will likely follow the same pattern.

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<sup>10</sup> India set to have Defence Cyber Agency in May; Rear Admiral Mohit to be its first chief:

<https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/india-set-to-have-defence-cyber-agency-in-may-rear-admiral-mohit-to-be-its-first-chief20190430102739/>

<sup>11</sup> India increases military capabilities in space two years after Mission Shakti

<https://zeenews.india.com/india/india-increases-military-capabilities-in-space-two-years-after-mission-shakti-2350777.html>

<sup>12</sup> Defence Space Research Agency: Modi govt approves new body to develop space warfare weapon systems:

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/defence-space-research-agency-modi-govt-approves-new-body-to-develop-space-warfare-weapon-systems-1546951-2019-06-11>

<sup>13</sup> India's Coming 'Rocket Force' <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/indias-coming-rocket-force/>

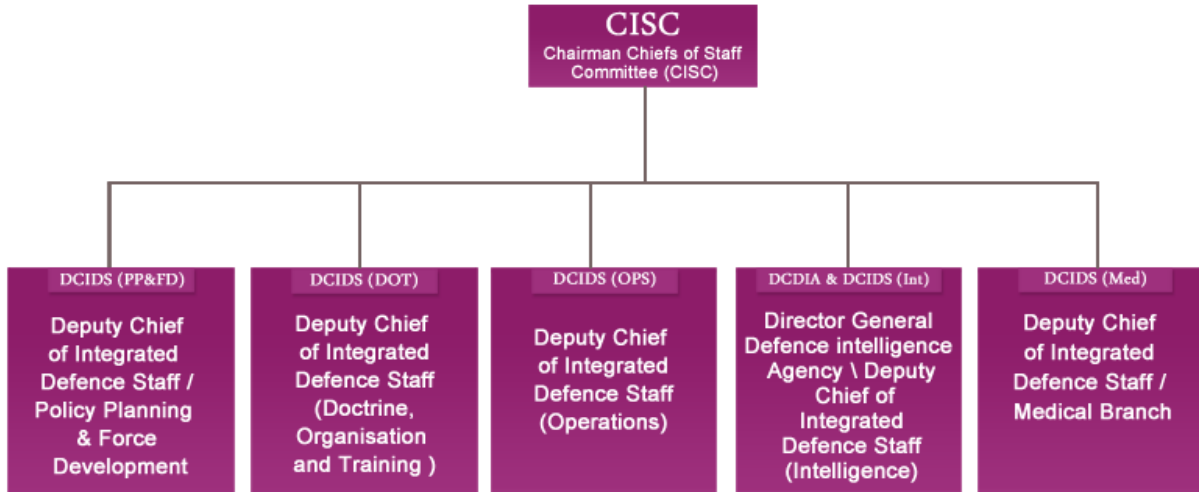
<sup>14</sup> India's Pralay ballistic missile: a step towards a rocket force?

<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis//2022/04/indias-pralay-ballistic-missile-a-step-towards-a-rocket-force>

<sup>15</sup> About IDS/ Organisation: <https://ids.nic.in/organisation.php>

The next major step in this direction came in 2019 with creation of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), a tri-service chief of 4 stars rank.<sup>16</sup> The CDS is responsible for the following:

1. Department of Military Affairs (DMA) within MoD
2. Armed forces, namely, Army, Navy, Air Force & Territorial Army..
3. Integrated HQs of MoD including those of Army, Navy, Air Force and Defence Staff.
4. Bulk of procurements.



As mentioned earlier, Army is already experimenting with the concept of combined arms operations, but there is some pushback against the concept of tri-service theater command from Air Force. One major reason is believed to be lack of sufficient resources, i.e. fighter squadrons. As mentioned earlier, their deployment and concerns over losing control of prestigious departments.<sup>17, 18</sup>

Yet faced with huge operational inefficiencies in the current structure of 17 single service commands in 3 branches, it seems that creation of integrated TCs is a matter of when, rather than how. One of the incidents which made such issues painfully obvious was Army’s purchase of a grand total of 6 Apache helicopters after IAF purchased 22. Experts point out that such wasteful

<sup>16</sup> Cabinet approves creation of the post of Chief of Defence Staff in the rank of four star General  
<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1597425>

<sup>17</sup> What IAF chief’s thumbs down for separate air defence command means for India’s military theaterisation plans  
<https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/what-iaf-chief-s-thumbs-down-for-separate-air-defence-command-means-for-india-s-military-theaterisation-plans-1976977-2022-07-18>

<sup>18</sup> Theatre Commander under Chief of Defence Staff is not a good idea  
<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/air-force-cds-theatre-commander-7425531/>

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expenses could have been avoided in a TC structure in which all the service arms were working together instead of isolated silos.

A possible restructuring may result in consolidation of all 17 above mentioned commands in to following:<sup>19</sup>

1. Western Land Theatre covering Indo-Pak border from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Punjab. Mostly mechanised troops.
2. Northern Land Theatre covering Indo-Pak and Indo-Tibet borders in J&K, Laddakh, Himachal and perhaps Uttarakhand. Dominated by mountain infantry with limited mechanisation.
3. Eastern Land Theatre covering Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal borders. Same as northern.
4. Maritime Theatre Command by merging Eastern and Western Command.
5. Air Defence Command.

## CONCLUSION

Indian tri-service theater commands have been a work in progress for a long time with the process picking up some pace and momentum in the last 4-5 years. There has been a lot of disgruntlement against it within armed forces for various reasons, but it seems that the process is well on its way with only a few roadblocks left the way. Even with push from the government, senior leadership of armed forces and increased budget (unlikely) , the process may take 7-10 years more to be completed.

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<sup>19</sup> What are military theatre commands and why does India want to switch to them  
<https://theprint.in/defence/what-are-military-theatre-commands-and-why-does-india-want-to-switch-to-them/690487/>