Integrated Theatre Commands

Why in news?

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- A committee appointed by the Defence Ministry has recommended **creating 3 integrated theatre commands of the Indian armed forces.**
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- Northern, western and southern, instead of the 17 in place currently.
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What is an integrated theatre command?

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- An integrated theatre command envisages a **unified command of the three Services, under a single commander,** for geographical theatres that are of security concern.
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- The commander of such a force will be able to bring to bear all resources at his disposal — from the IAF, the Army and the Navy — with seamless efficacy.
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- The integrated theatre commander will not be answerable to individual Services, and will be free to train, equip and exercise his command to make it a cohesive fighting force capable of achieving designated goals.
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- The logistic resources required to support his operations will also be placed at the disposal of the theatre commander so that he does not have to look for anything when operations are ongoing.
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- This is in contrast to **the model of service-specific commands** which India currently has, wherein the Army, Air Force and Navy all have their own commands all over the country.
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- In case of war, each Service Chief is expected to control the operations of his Service through individual commands, while they operate jointly.

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- The committee, which was headed by **Lt General DB Shekatkar (retd)** has recommended the creation of 3 integrated theatre commands — northern for the China border, western for the Pakistan border and southern for the maritime role.
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How is “jointness” different from integrated commands?

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- Jointness means that while the 3 Services progress and develop in their respective spheres with their independent identity, they function together and so coordinate their operations in war.
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- **Integrated commands, on the other hand, seek to merge individual service identities to achieve a composite and cohesive whole.**
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- It implies enmeshing the three Services together at different levels and placing them under one commander for execution of operational plans.
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How many commands does India have currently?

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- The Indian armed forces **currently have 17 commands.**
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- There are 7 commands each of the Army [Northern, Eastern, Southern, Western, Central, South-western and Army Training Command (ARTRAC)].
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- Air Force has [Western, Eastern, Southern, South-western, Central, Training and Maintenance].
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- Navy has 3 commands [Western, Eastern and Southern].
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- Each command is headed by a 4-star rank military officer.
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- Interestingly, none of these 17 commands is co-located at the same station, nor are their areas of operational responsibility contiguous.
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- In addition, there are 2 tri-service commands [Strategic Forces Command

(SFC)] and Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)], which is headed by rotation by officers from the 3 Services.
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How do the 17 commands coordinate during war?

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- Coordination of operations is expected to be carried out at the level of Service Headquarters through the **Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC),** which is headed by the senior-most Service Chief who is designated as Chairman, COSC.
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- He is expected to simultaneously perform both the roles of Chief of his Service as well as the Chairman, COSC.
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- The COSC generally functions on the principle of consensus, and this makes decision making on jointness very difficult.
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- **India has an integrated theatre command only in ANC.**
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- The other tri-service command, the SFC, looks after the delivery and operational control of the country's nuclear assets.
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- It was created in 2003, but because it has no specific geographic responsibility and a designated role, it is not an integrated theatre command but an integrated functional command.
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- There has been a demand for other integrated functional commands, such as the cyber, aerospace and Special Operations commands, but the government is yet to approve any.
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Why is there a difference of opinion?

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- The Army believes that it is time to move away from a "service specific approach to operations towards a system which avoids duplication, ensures optimum utilisation of available resources.
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- Air force on the other hand feels that it doesn't have enough resources — fighter squadrons, mid-air refuellers and AWACS — to allocate them dedicatedly to different theatre commanders.
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- It believes that **India is not geographically large enough to be divided into different theatres,** as resources from one theatre can easily be moved to another theatre.
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- The Navy considers the current model of control by the Navy Headquarters ideally suited for its strategic role.
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- There are also underlying fears about the **smaller Services losing their autonomy and importance.**
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What is the way forward?

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- Experience from the US, Russia and China shows that the decision to create integrated theatre commands will have to be a political one, which will then be executed by the defence services.
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- With the defence secretary set to retire this month and no full-time minister in charge, such a push looks unlikely in the immediate future.
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- A precursor to the creation of integrated theatre commands has to be the appointment of a **Chief of Defence Staff** or Permanent Chairman, COSC.
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- This was first proposed by the GoM in 2001, but hasn't been implemented so far.
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Source: Indian Express

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