

Rethinking India's Theatre-isation

Mains: *GS III - Defence*

Why in news?

Recent Wars in Ukraine and Iran highlight air-power limits, sharpening India's debate on theatre-isation and whether the IAF's centralised flexibility can meet a China conflict.

What is Theatre-isation?

- **Theatre-isation** - It refers to the reorganisation of the Army, Navy, and Air Force into **integrated theatre commands**, with each command responsible for a specific geographical area or strategic mission.
- A theatre commander is granted operational control over resources from all three military services.
- **Objectives** - To ensure joint planning, expedite decision-making, enhance resource allocation efficiency, and achieve integrated war-fighting capabilities.
- **Contrast with IAF** - The IAF prioritises **centralised control and flexibility**, enabling quick redeployment of aircraft and assets across fronts as needs evolve.



SHANKAR
IAS PARLIAMENT



Theatre Commander



Unified Command | Joint Operations



Stronger
coordination



Faster
decision-making



Better resource
utilisation



More effective
war-fighting

What limitations of air power have been demonstrated by recent conflicts?

- **Ukraine: Air Denial Operations** - Ukraine's integrated air-defence network prevented Russian forces from achieving full control of Ukrainian airspace.
- **Key lesson** - Air superiority by itself is insufficient to defeat a robust, well-networked air-defence system.
- **Iran: Air Dominance** - Although the opposing coalition established extensive control

over Iranian airspace, this control did not necessarily result in a decisive political outcome.

- **Key lesson** - This case demonstrates that while air power is effective in destroying visible targets, it cannot eliminate all concealed assets or guarantee strategic victory.
- **Drone Warfare and Cost Asymmetry** - Low-cost drones are capable of imposing disproportionately high financial burdens on defenders who rely on expensive interceptor systems.
- India's **Operation Sindoor (2025)** exposed cost-asymmetry challenges, which in a China conflict could be far greater due to Beijing's massive drone production and military resources.
- **Need for Integrated Warfare** - While modern air power is indispensable, achieving air superiority alone is insufficient for victory in warfare.
- Integrated air defence, drone technology, electronic warfare, intelligence capabilities, ground forces, and joint operations are also critical.

What challenges does the IAF face in countering China and other major threats?

- **Numerical Limitation** - The IAF has fewer combat aircraft compared to China's larger air-power ecosystem, creating a resource imbalance.
- **Geographic Challenge** - Himalayan terrain restricts airbases, logistics, and redeployment, meaning a multi-front crisis could overstretch aircraft and air-defence systems.
- **Ongoing Gaps in Integration** - India continues to face challenges in joint planning, training, and integrated force generation among its military services.
 - **Historical Context** - The Kargil War (1999) and the Ladakh crisis (2020) revealed persistent weaknesses in inter-service coordination.
- **Command and Decision-Making Issues** - Consultative coordination impedes timely decision-making during rapidly evolving conflicts, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of military responses.
- **Institutional and Career Barriers** - Structural gaps, such as disparities in service

ranks, organizational hierarchies, and career progression pathways, inhibit the development of deeper jointness.

- **Two or Multi-Front Challenge** - India faces the strategic imperative of deploying limited high-value assets such as Rafale aircraft and S-400 missile systems across multiple simultaneous fronts.
- **Coordination Risk** - In the absence of an integrated command structure, allocation decisions may become slow or fragmented, thereby reducing the effectiveness of the overall response.

What are the steps to be taken?

- **Integrated Training & Postings** - Expand joint training, exercises, planning, and permanent cross-service postings.
- **Career Progression** - Make jointness a core element of career advancement, not an additional responsibility.
- **Seamless Network** - Integrate fighters, S-400s, SAMs, radars, AWACS, and counter-drone systems into a unified air defence grid.
- **Layered Protection** - Build multi-tier defence against aircraft, cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and drones.
- **Affordable Defence** - Reduce reliance on expensive interceptors for low-cost drone threats.
- **Innovative Investment** - Focus on electronic warfare, directed energy systems, low-cost interceptors, and indigenous counter UAS technologies.
- **Improve Joint Force Generation** - Enable rapid assignment of air, land, and maritime assets to theatres through realistic multi-front war-gaming and mobilisation exercises.
- **Resolve Theatre Command Structure** - Government must finalise theatre command by reconciling IAF's flexibility with operational integration.
- **Focus on Joint War-fighting** - Theatre-isation should aim at faster, effective joint operations, not mere organisational restructuring.

What lies ahead?

- India should reconcile the Indian Air Force's asset-shifting flexibility with the imperative for integrated joint operations.
- Future conflicts are expected to integrate air power, drones, missiles, cyber capabilities, electronic warfare, space, air defence, and ground forces.
- The establishment of theatre commands should be accompanied by doctrinal, technological, and institutional reforms rather than limited to boundary adjustments.

Reference

[The Hindu | Rethinking India's Theatre-isation](#)

