



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

34/17

## CLAMOUR FOR THEATRE COMMANDS IS A PEACETIME PHENOMENON

Air Marshal **Vinod Patney**  
*Former Vice Chief of Air Staff and  
 Presently Director General, CAPS*

It is uncanny how so many consider Theatre Commands an inescapable necessity during peacetime but can quote no incident where, in independent India, the absence of such an organisation has impeded the prosecution of any war. In fact history records that there has been no occasion in war where the three services have not operated with commendable cooperation. It is another matter that as soon as the war is over and peace obtains, the clamour for organisational changes starts again. The one occasion when we flirted with the idea of a Theatre Commander was in the initial stages of the operations in Sri Lanka by the Indian Peace Keeping Force. In the very early days itself, helicopters were tasked on a mission without proper air force advice with avoidable damage to the machines and unnecessary loss of lives. Almost immediately thereafter, an air component commander and a naval counterpart were positioned to take charge of air and naval assets. The aircraft continued to support the operations but, henceforth, the

control and tasking was under the air commander. Professionalism trumped adhocism. That will always be the case.

The questions we must ask ourselves is why we need a theatre command system now when no real need has been felt so far in war. What is the type of warfare we envisage we may be involved in? Would it be vastly different from the previous occasions? What really has changed? More importantly, what benefits will accrue, if any, and what are the disadvantages that we will have to needlessly overcome? Emotions should not cloud our judgement.

We are unlikely to fight a war in faraway lands. Nor are we likely to be involved in a medium to high intensity conflict for long durations. Resources available to the armed forces will always be scarce and this is particularly true in the case of air power assets. Unity of control is a byword in the employment of air power as, *inter alia*, the limited resources

may have to be concentrated for the desired effect. Division of resources in different theatres will imply that finite and avoidable time will be required for the needed concentration of air assets. It is now a well accepted fact that air power will be in the vanguard of military actions in most scenarios where a sizeable force is to be used. More importantly, it is air power that can go to war almost immediately. That requires training together of air force elements to foster understanding amongst the pilots and support systems so that the missions in war are but an extension of the training schedules. We also need an organisation that can concentrate forces at the earliest. Theatre commands will increase the all important time element and maybe training issues will also raise their ugly head.

It is true that conventional wars, even of short durations, are unlikely and we will have to increasingly deal with low intensity and sub conventional warfare. To prosecute such operations, do we really need a mammoth organisation like a theatre command? Will not the present system suffice as it has stood by us in the past and continues to do so? We certainly do not need a theatre command to prosecute such low key operations.

It is often argued that theatre commands will come into their own in case of a major conflagration. The issue requires examination. The starting point must be an assessment of the type of wars that could be imposed on us and the

type of wars that we are capable of prosecuting. The second aspect is more challenging and decidedly more significant. Our military capabilities must be examined in some detail with each service bringing to the table, *de novo*, what the service is capable of in war either individually or in consonance with the other service(s). Does such an analysis require a theatre command? It does not but an honest approach is essential. Thereafter, planning for the type of operations we can undertake can be determined and a joint plan(s) arrived at. The type of organisation that will best meet the requirements will then automatically suggest itself. The great advantage will be that all three services will be on board and there will be no need to impose any organisation in spite of objections that are purely professional in nature. Imposing jointness is not the way ahead but insistence on a continued system of joint planning is. The more that the services carry out joint planning, the better will be the mutual understanding of the individual strengths and weaknesses and that will lead us to the type of organisation that is best suited to meet the needs of all three services and for optimising military capabilities. Communication systems have improved considerably over the years and now communication of thoughts amongst the military practitioners must also rise above parochial interests.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*