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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Limits of Air Power and What They Mean for Theatre-isation

 **THE HINDU**

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The Limits of Air Power and What They Mean for Theatre-isation

The Hindu

26 August 2026

GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The Air Force argues that scarce air assets must stay centrally controlled so they can surge wherever needed. Does that argument get stronger or weaker in a simultaneous two-front contingency?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Control of the air has repeatedly been achieved and repeatedly failed to end a war. That is an argument about what air power is for, not about who commands it.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Defence reform, jointness and theatre commands are recurring GS3 topics, and answers usually list committees without engaging the substantive disagreement. This editorial supplies the disagreement.

GS Paper 3: Security challenges and their management; various security forces and agencies and their mandate; defence reforms.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Theatre command	A geographically defined command exercising operational control over forces of all three services	The reform under debate
Jointness versus integration	Services cooperating while retaining separate structures, against fusing structures under one commander	The distinction the debate turns on
Two-front contingency	Simultaneous hostilities on more than one border	The scenario that makes concentration insufficient

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Reform Trail

YEAR	DEVELOPMENT
1999	Kargil Review Committee constituted after the Kargil conflict
2001	Group of Ministers report; Integrated Defence Staff created; Andaman and Nicobar Command established
2003	Strategic Forces Command established
2011	Naresh Chandra Task Force
2016	Shekatkar Committee
December 2019	Office of the Chief of Defence Staff created; Department of Military Affairs established
2023	Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act

General Bipin Rawat became India's first Chief of Defence Staff in **January 2020**. The **Inter-Services Organisations Act, 2023** is the underrated enabler: it empowered the head of a joint organisation to exercise **disciplinary and administrative authority over personnel of other services**, which had previously been a real legal obstacle to joint command.

What India Already Has

India operates **two existing tri-service commands**: the **Andaman and Nicobar Command** (2001), which is geographic, and the **Strategic Forces Command** (2003), which is functional and handles nuclear delivery. These are the working precedents, and a frequent Prelims fact.

THE ANALYSIS

1. The editorial's argument is empirical, not organisational. It does not begin from a claim that theatre commands are administratively neater. It begins from the observation that in **Ukraine** and in the **strikes on Iran**, control of the air was achieved without compelling a political outcome. If air superiority is not independently decisive, the case for preserving air power as an intact strategic reserve weakens, and the case for integrating it into combined effects strengthens.

2. The Air Force's objection is coherent and must be stated properly. Air assets are **scarce, expensive and uniquely mobile**. Their comparative advantage over ground forces is precisely the ability to be somewhere else within hours. Distributing a limited fleet permanently among theatre commanders

converts a mobile national asset into several static local ones, potentially leaving every theatre individually insufficient. This is an operational argument, not institutional self-defence, and answers that dismiss it as turf protection are weaker for doing so.

3. The two-front scenario is where the objection breaks. Concentration works when there is one decisive point. It cannot resolve **simultaneous** demands in two theatres, because the fleet cannot be in both. At that moment someone must **adjudicate** priority between theatres, and India has not constituted the authority that would do so. The reform is therefore most needed in exactly the contingency for which the current arrangement is least prepared.

4. The unresolved question is authority, not doctrine. India has the **CDS**, the **DMA**, the legal power under the 2023 Act, and two working tri-service commands. What it lacks is a settled answer to who exercises **operational command** over multi-service forces in a theatre, and whose priority prevails. Everything else is downstream of that.

5. Reorganisation under pressure is the risk worth naming. Restructuring command relationships during or immediately before a contingency is the worst available timing, because command systems depend on rehearsed familiarity rather than on organisational charts. The argument for deciding now is partly that the alternative is deciding under fire.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Kargil Review Committee: 1999; Group of Ministers report: 2001; Integrated Defence Staff created 2001.

Chief of Defence Staff created December 2019; General Bipin Rawat was the first CDS, taking office January 2020. The Department of Military Affairs was created alongside.

Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023 empowered joint-organisation commanders over personnel of other services.

India's two existing tri-service commands: Andaman and Nicobar Command (2001), geographic, and Strategic Forces Command (2003), functional.

Later review bodies: Naresh Chandra Task Force (2011), Shekatkar Committee (2016).

The Chief of Integrated Defence Staff (CISC) heads the Integrated Defence Staff.

*Do not confuse **jointness** with **integration**. Jointness is services cooperating while retaining separate command structures; integration fuses them under a single operational commander. India has considerable jointness and limited integration. Also note that the **Strategic Forces Command is functional, not geographic**, so it is not a theatre command.*

THE DEBATE

FOR (theatre-isation should proceed): Recent conflicts show air superiority is not independently decisive, so air power belongs inside integrated effects. A two-front contingency cannot be met by concentration, and the authority to adjudicate between theatres does not exist. Restructuring during a crisis is worse than restructuring now.

AGAINST (the Air Force objection is operationally sound): Air assets are scarce, costly and mobile, and their value lies in massing at the decisive point. Permanent distribution leaves each theatre with a force too small to matter while destroying the ability to surge. The organisational benefit is asserted; the operational cost is concrete.

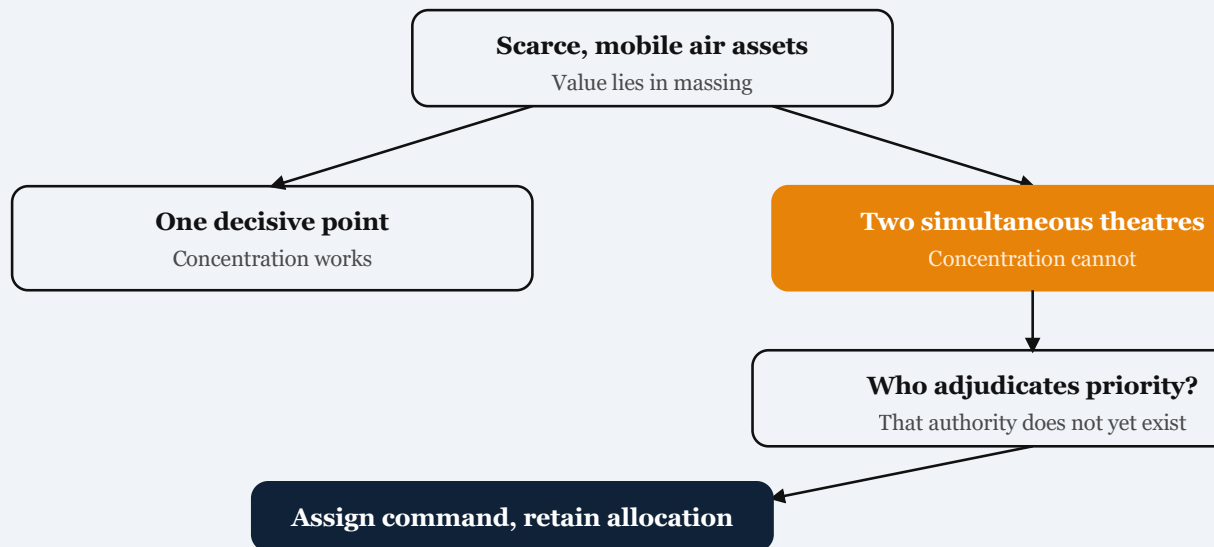
Balanced verdict: The dispute is soluble because **command and allocation are separable**. Theatre commanders can hold genuine operational authority over forces **assigned** to them, while a **joint air component** retains the ability to allocate and reallocate air effort across theatres according to priority set nationally. This is close to how large air forces elsewhere reconcile the same tension. What India cannot afford is to leave the authority question unanswered while assuming the answer will be obvious in a crisis.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

When two institutions disagree about a reorganisation, test whether the disagreement is about **objectives** or about **allocation of a scarce resource**. Objective disputes are resolved by argument; allocation disputes are resolved by design.

Here both parties agree on the objective, which is maximum combat effect. They disagree about whether a scarce mobile asset is better held centrally or assigned locally. That is a design question with a known family of answers: assign command, retain allocation, and specify in advance who decides priority when demands conflict. Recognising that a dispute is a design problem rather than a values problem is what makes it tractable, and it generalises well beyond defence.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



The Air Force is right about the left branch and the editorial is right about the right one. The resolution at the bottom concedes both.

TAKEAWAY BOX

Control of the air has repeatedly been achieved and repeatedly failed to end a war. That is an argument about what air power is for, not about who commands it.

Kargil Review Committee 1999; GoM report and Integrated Defence Staff 2001; Andaman and Nicobar Command 2001; Strategic Forces Command 2003; CDS created December 2019 with General Bipin Rawat taking office January 2020; Department of Military Affairs 2019; Inter-Services Organisations Act 2023; Naresh Chandra Task Force 2011; Shekatkar Committee 2016.

When a service objects to a reform on operational grounds, how should a civilian government distinguish professional judgement from institutional self-interest?

Connects to past UPSC Mains questions on defence reforms, the CDS, jointness among the armed forces, and India's two-front challenge.

"India has achieved jointness without achieving integration." Critically examine with reference to the theatre command debate.

Source: The Limits of Air Power and What They Mean for Theatre-isation — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in *The Hindu*, Lt Gen Harinder Singh (Retd) argues that the war in Ukraine and the strikes on Iran demonstrate that air superiority alone does not deliver decisive outcomes, so India's theatre-isation debate cannot be settled by deference to the Indian Air Force's preference for centralised and flexible air employment, and that India must resolve unified theatre command authority and joint-force integration before facing a simultaneous two-front contingency with China.



SUPPORTING

- Recent conflicts show that achieving control of the air did not by itself compel a political outcome, which weakens the premise that air power is a war-winning instrument best husbanded centrally rather than a supporting arm best integrated with ground and maritime effects.
- A two-front contingency is precisely the scenario in which centralised control is least able to deliver, because assets cannot surge to two theatres at once and the adjudication of competing demands would fall to a joint authority that India has not yet constituted.
- The unresolved question is authority rather than doctrine: India has created the office of the Chief of Defence Staff and the Department of Military Affairs but has not settled who holds operational command over assets from multiple services in a theatre, which is the actual content of theatre-isation.



COUNTER

The counter-view, long held by the Indian Air Force, is that air assets are scarce, expensive and inherently mobile, so their advantage lies in being concentrated and surged wherever the decisive effect is required. Dividing a limited fleet permanently among theatre commanders would leave each theatre with a force too small to be decisive while removing the ability to mass, and would trade a real operational strength for an organisational tidiness whose benefit is unproven.



WAY FORWARD

The reconciliation likely lies in separating command from allocation: constitute theatre commanders with genuine operational authority over assigned forces, while retaining a joint air component structure that allocates and can reallocate air effort across theatres according

to priority set at the national level, and completing the enabling legal and personnel architecture before further reorganisation.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Integrated theatre commands have been under consideration in India for over two decades. Examine the strategic case for theatre-isation and the operational objections to it, with reference to recent conflicts. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India has debated integrated theatre commands since the Kargil Review Committee, and the debate has repeatedly stalled on the Indian Air Force's objection to dispersing scarce air assets. Writing in The Hindu, Lt Gen Harinder Singh (Retd) argues that recent conflicts undercut the premise of that objection and that the reorganisation cannot wait for a two-front contingency to force it.

BODY

The institutional groundwork exists. The Kargil Review Committee of 1999 and the Group of Ministers report of 2001 produced the Integrated Defence Staff in 2001, along with two existing tri-service commands, the Andaman and Nicobar Command created in 2001 and the Strategic Forces Command in 2003.

The office of the Chief of Defence Staff was created in December 2019, with the Department of Military Affairs established alongside it, and the Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control and Discipline) Act, 2023 supplied the legal power for a commander of a joint organisation to exercise disciplinary authority over personnel of other services, removing a genuine obstacle. What remains unresolved is operational command: who directs assets from multiple services within a theatre, and whose priority prevails when demands compete.

The Air Force's objection is coherent on its own terms. Air assets are scarce, costly and uniquely mobile, so their comparative advantage lies in concentration and rapid reallocation, and permanently distributing a limited fleet among theatre commanders risks leaving every theatre individually insufficient.

The editorial's counter is empirical rather than doctrinal: Ukraine and the Iran strikes indicate that control of the air, even where achieved, did not compel a political result, which suggests air power functions as one component of an integrated effect rather than as an independently decisive instrument to be preserved intact. The two-front argument sharpens this, since concentration cannot resolve simultaneous demands in two theatres, and the adjudicating authority for that choice does not currently exist in institutional form.

CONCLUSION

A balanced answer should avoid presenting this as a turf dispute. The Air Force's concern about fragmenting a scarce fleet is operationally real.

The reconciliation is to separate command from allocation, giving theatre commanders authority over

assigned forces while retaining a joint air component that can reallocate effort by national priority, and to complete the legal and personnel architecture before further reorganisation.

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