

# INDIAN MILITARY THEATRE COMMANDS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DETERRENCE STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

Syed Ali Abbas\*

## *Abstract*

*The establishment of integrated military theatre commands in India is a significant restructuring of the country's defence forces, with tangible consequences for Pakistan's security. The reform will bring the integration of the Army, Navy and Air Force into Joint Command Forces that can operate fast and on multiple domains, on the basis of previous ideas like the Cold Start doctrine and the Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs). The developments are potentially destabilising because they compress the traditional response time, reduce the time limit for crisis decision-making and enhance the risk of limited military response under the nuclear overhang scenario for India. By enabling faster and more coordinated offensive options, India's Theaterisation deepens Pakistan's security dilemma and raises concerns about rapid, limited strikes that could exploit reduced warning time. The paper discusses the implications of Indian theatre commands for deterrence stability in South Asia. It argues that Pakistan will likely respond with enhanced inter-service integration, better intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) and continued evolution of its Full Spectrum Deterrence posture, to deny India the space for limited war. The methodological approach used in the study is qualitative analysis, which is based on official statements, institutional reforms, public statements, and open-source strategic assessments. The analysis finds that while India is moving toward greater operational efficacy and jointness, Theaterisation may also raise crisis instability, quicken escalation risk, and further complicate the strategic stability in South Asia.*

**Keywords:** India, Pakistan, Theatre Commands, Theaterisation, Cold Start Doctrine, IBGs, Strategic Stability, Deterrence.

## **Introduction**

**I**ndia's impending transition to integrated theatre commands represents one of the most consequential military reorganisations. By 2025, New Delhi planned to consolidate its 17 single-service commands (Army, Air Force, Navy) into three unified theatre commands covering its western border (Pakistan front), northern/eastern border (China front), and maritime domain.<sup>1</sup> Indian officials argue that the suggested reform will facilitate the coordination of joint operations and make rapid and more coordinated responses across land, air, and maritime domains.

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\*Syed Ali Abbas is a Research / Communication Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies (CISS), Islamabad. The author can be reached at smalinaqvio5@gmail.com.

The theatre command concept, which began during World War 2 amalgamates the service branches, which are commanded by one commander to provide a unitary approach to strategic planning and execution. Advocates claim that this type of integration maximises operational capabilities by increasing coordination and resource pooling, and thus allows multi-domain responses to threats more quickly.<sup>2</sup> For Pakistan, Theaterisation by India is a two-edged sword. Pakistan believes that integrated theatres will further skew the traditional military balance in favour of India, making India bold to launch fast, limited strikes below the nuclear threshold.<sup>3</sup>

India's top military priority continues to be the western frontier with Pakistan. This can be seen in the planned Western theatre command, with its headquarters to be located in Jaipur and focusing on Pakistan. This is likely to be operationalised before the Northern theatre command, whose role is to handle the situation along the India-China border. This sequencing supports the long-standing evaluation of Pakistan that, regardless of the rhetoric of India about its efforts to counter China, it is Pakistan that is the main target of India's force posture.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Pakistan refers to the repetitive bellicose rhetoric by Indian officials, like the open threats of cross-line/cross-border attacks (LoC) by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, whose rhetoric is significantly stronger than Indian rhetoric against China.<sup>5</sup>

Given the developments, it is critical to evaluate the implications of India's Theaterisation for deterrence stability, crisis management and military response timeline in South Asia, and give viable policy suggestions to the military planners and policymakers to enhance Pakistan's security. A more flexible and coordinated Indian combined force could operate faster, more efficiently, and with less forewarning, limiting Pakistan's capacity to react effectively in times of crisis. Existing studies have concentrated on India's military modernisation, military doctrines, joint warfare, and overall dimension of the strategic competition; however, there has been comparatively less analysis of the nature of India's theatre commands and the impact on Pakistan's security and deterrence calculations.

This paper attempts to fill that void by exploring the implications of India's organisational changes in the military and changing operational doctrines on strategic stability in the South Asian context. It particularly addresses two key questions: how can Indian theatre commands influence deterrence dynamics in the region, and what are Pakistan's options? Methodologically, the research is of a qualitative nature, using the official policy statements, institutional changes and open-source strategic evaluations. This paper contends that the integrated theatre commands are not simply administrative or organisational reforms, but developments with implications for deterrence stability in South Asia. The central proposition of the paper is that India's Theaterisation, while intended to improve operational effectiveness and joint warfare capability, may increase escalation risks and undermine deterrence stability and complicate crisis management by encouraging perceptions of limited-war feasibility under a nuclear environment.

It further argued that Pakistan's changing military posture, in terms of jointness, modernisation of military forces, and improved deterrence signalling, is an attempt to prevent any operational space for limited war and maintain strategic stability in the region. In doing so, the study highlights the challenges these developments pose for Pakistan's defence planning and contributes to debates on deterrence stability and strategic balance in South Asia.

## **India's Theatre Command Reforms: Evolution and Objectives**

### **Drivers of Theaterisation in India**

India's push toward integrated theatre commands have been years in the making, driven by lessons from past conflicts and evolving strategic challenges. A major catalyst was the 1999 Kargil War, where India's fragmented service-based command structure led to coordination problems between the Army and Air Force during the conflict with Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> The Kargil Review Committee recommended sweeping changes, including the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) position and joint operational commands to eliminate inter-service turf battles.<sup>7</sup> However, progress was slow over the next two decades. The concept gained momentum after 2016, when the Shekatkar Committee explicitly proposed establishing three integrated theatre commands.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, the appointment of India's first CDS (the late General. Bipin Rawat) injected new urgency into the process, though his efforts initially faced resistance, especially from the Air Force, over concerns about division of air assets and service autonomy.<sup>9</sup>

The strategic rationale behind Theaterisation solidified amid India's narrative building regarding the so-called "two-front war" dilemma. However, this notion represents India's self-constructed perception rather than an actual operational reality. Indian planners increasingly project a scenario of simultaneous conflict with China in the north and Pakistan in the west. The late Indian CDS General Bipin Rawat often underscored this perceived China-Pakistan dual threat wherein the two adversaries might coordinate military pressure on India's separated fronts.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Indian military thinking has slowly shifted toward offensive, proactive options. New Delhi's adoption of a limited-war doctrine aims to deploy IBGs for rapid strikes along the western border, seeking quick, local gains against Pakistan without triggering nuclear escalation.<sup>11</sup> Theatre commands are viewed as the organisational mechanism to make such joint operations feasible at short notice. In effect, India's Theaterisation is designed to enable "swift and decisive military strikes" by bringing to bear the Army, Air Force, and Navy in unison. This will allow us to overcome the sluggish mobilisation and inter-service discord that hampered past responses.<sup>12</sup>

Another driver is India's aspiration for greater power projection and multi-domain dominance.<sup>13</sup> Indian strategists observe that major militaries, the United States, China, and Russia, have long implemented theatre or unified command structures to synergise their forces.

China's creation of integrated theatre commands in 2016 and its Western Theater Command (covering India's frontier) have not gone unnoticed in New Delhi. India's growing security partnerships (e.g. with the U.S. via agreements like COMCASA, BECA, LEMOA, and in the Quad framework) have also exposed Indian officers to modern joint command concepts and best practices of integration.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the theatre command reform is portrayed by Indian officials as a natural evolution to keep pace with contemporary warfare demands, from cyber and space integration to the need for unified logistics, intelligence, and command-and-control. As India's Navy Chief summarised in 2025, full Theaterisation is the "ultimate goal" to achieve unified planning, a common battlespace picture, and integrated operations across the services.<sup>15</sup>

### **Structure of India's New Theatre Commands**

Under the plan now being implemented, India will establish three geographic Integrated Theatre Commands (ITCs), each commanded by a three-star general or equivalent from any service, reporting to the CDS.<sup>16</sup> The broad structure, as articulated by India's CDS General Anil Chauhan and reflected in recent legislative changes (the Inter-Services Organisations Act, 2023<sup>17</sup>), involves fusing 17 single-service commands into these joint theatres. The proposed theatres and their mandates are:

- **Western Theatre Command (WTC):** Headquarters: Jaipur. This command is oriented toward India's western borders, facing Pakistan. It will subsume the Indian Army's Western, South Western, and Southern Commands along with corresponding IAF commands.<sup>18</sup> The WTC's primary mission is to defend against or execute operations against Pakistan, including the LoC in Kashmir and the international border from Kashmir down to Gujarat. Notably, the WTC is intended as the launching pad for India's Pakistan-centric "Proactive" war strategy (Cold Start), integrating ground offensive units (IBGs) with requisite air support under one commander.
- **Northern Theatre Command (NTC):** Headquarters: Lucknow. This command will handle India's northern and eastern frontiers, focused primarily on China. It merges the Army's Northern Command (responsible for Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJ&K) and Ladakh) and Eastern Command (responsible for the Northeast), plus associated Air Force assets. The Northern Theatre Command (NTC) is envisioned by India to manage its posture against China's People's Liberation Army along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), as well as any simultaneous pressure that China could, in India's assessment, coordinate with Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> Notably, parts of India's existing Northern Command also border Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir, suggesting that the NTC would retain a secondary role vis-à-vis Pakistan in India's perceived "two-front" contingency. However, India conceptualises the NTC primarily as a China-oriented theatre.

Within Indian strategic circles, this structure is portrayed as a means to ensure politico-military concentration on the so-called “northern threat,” drawing a parallel with China’s Western Theatre Command,<sup>20</sup> though Beijing’s posture towards India remains largely limited in scope.

- **Maritime Theatre Command (MTC):** Headquarters: Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum) in Kerala. This command will encompass India’s maritime domain, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and integrate the Navy with coastal elements of the Army and Air Force. The MTC’s purview includes protecting sea lines, littoral defence, and responding to threats in India’s waters and island territories. Initial plans considered locating this command’s HQ at the Navy’s sprawling Karwar base, but as of 2024, Trivandrum was identified as the HQ.<sup>21</sup> The MTC aims to secure India’s interests across the Indian Ocean, from the Persian Gulf to the Malacca Strait, and would be led by a Navy commander. Given Pakistan’s relatively smaller coastline, the MTC is less directly about Indo-Pak conflict, though it would handle any Pakistan-related naval contingencies (e.g. blockade or Arabian Sea engagements) as part of a broader theatre that also covers other maritime threats.

**Table 1:** India’s Proposed Integrated Theatre Commands

Theater Command	Headquarters	Primary Focus (Adversary/Region)
Western Theatre Command	Jaipur	Pakistan front (Western border and LoC)
Northern Theatre Command	Lucknow	China front (Northern & Eastern borders)
Maritime Theatre Command	Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum)	Indian Ocean Region (maritime threats; Pakistan’s naval front in the Arabian Sea)

**Source:** Author’s Compilation

The table outlines India’s proposed integrated theatre command structure and its respective operational orientations. The Western Theatre Command is primarily focused on the Pakistan front, while the Northern Theatre Command is directed toward the China border. The Maritime Theatre Command is intended to oversee operations in the Indian Ocean Region, including the Arabian Sea. Collectively, these commands reflect India’s shift toward integrated multi-domain warfare and faster joint-force employment, with significant implications for deterrence stability and crisis dynamics in South Asia.

## **Legal and Institutional Frameworks**

Since 2019, New Delhi has built a layered legal-institutional architecture to transition from single-service commands toward integrated theatres. The creation of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)<sup>22</sup> and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA)<sup>23</sup> gave a single point of authority to drive jointness, restructure operational commands, and harmonise doctrine, training, and acquisitions across the Army, Navy, and Air Force. A statutory step followed by Parliament's Inter-Services Organisations (Command, Control & Discipline) Act, 2023, brought into force on 10 May 2024, which empowers commanders of inter-service organisations to exercise command, disciplinary, and administrative authority over personnel from all services, removing a long-standing legal barrier to unified commands. The government then notified the ISO Rules (2025), effective 27 May 2025, operationalising the Act's provisions and explicitly framing them to "strengthen jointness" by enabling effective command and control within inter-service formations (a necessary precondition for theatre commands).<sup>24</sup> In parallel, the CDS has been issued binding joint orders with authority to accelerate integrated planning and execution, as part of the roll-out roadmap.<sup>25</sup>

Institutionally, India has also expanded the tri-service backbone that will underwrite theatre operations. This includes long-standing unified/tri-service structures, the Andaman & Nicobar Command and Strategic Forces Command, and the standing up of functional tri-service agencies under HQ Integrated Defence Staff: the Defence Cyber Agency, Defence Space Agency, and Armed Forces Special Operations Division.<sup>26</sup> To translate legal authority into day-to-day joint capability, the armed forces issued the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces (2017)<sup>27</sup> and, most recently, a Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations (2025), paired with the Technology Perspective & Capability Roadmap 2025, to codify integrated concepts across land, air, maritime, cyber, space, and the cognitive domain.<sup>28</sup> Practical enablers have been fielded through Joint Logistics Nodes (JLNs) at Mumbai, Guwahati, and Port Blair (sanctioned in 2020; operational from 1 January 2021) to create a joint logistics grid.

Most recently, during the Combined Commanders' Conference (CCC-2025) held in Kolkata, the Indian military announced two additional institutional reforms that further advance its Theaterisation agenda.<sup>29</sup>

First, the Education Wings of the Army, Navy and Air Force will be merged into a unified Tri-Services Education Corps, combining their respective education, training, and academic provisioning to standardise curricula, optimise personnel deployment, and rationalise infrastructure.<sup>30</sup> Second, three Joint Military Stations are to be established on the mainland, where facilities of all three services, logistics, maintenance, repair, supply, and infrastructure, will be consolidated under a lead service in each station.<sup>31</sup> These steps are explicitly intended to deepen service integration, reduce redundancy, and improve efficiency as India builds toward full theatre command capability.

**Table 2: Indian Military Publications**

<b>Official Document Title</b>	<b>Focus / Description</b>	<b>Key Points on Joint Operations</b>	<b>Relevance to Theatre Commands / Integration</b>
<b>Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces (2017)</b>	First tri-service doctrine by HQ IDS outlining joint warfighting principles.	Centres joint planning, training, and execution; cross-domain synergy.	Conceptual baseline for theatreisation; does not prescribe structures.
<b>Doctrine of the Indian Army (2018)</b>	Updated Army operational philosophy and threat outlook.	Emphasises integrated land, air operations and joint planning.	Bridges Army concepts to CDS-led theatreisation, with land-centric emphasis.
<b>Doctrine of the Indian Air Force (2022)</b>	Current IAF doctrinal statement (supersedes 2012).	State joint ops are foundational; stresses networked, multi-domain coordination with the Army/Navy.	Supports jointness but cautions against rigid theatre models that reduce airpower flexibility.
<b>Indian Maritime Military Strategy</b>	Authoritative Navy strategy framing maritime security and employment.	Calls for inter-service integration, MDA, and joint effect.	Aligns with a Maritime Theatre Command; promotes interoperable C2 and logistics.
<b>Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations (2025)</b>	Tri-service doctrine for land/sea/air/cyber/space/cognitive integration.	Convergence of effects; shared COP and synchronised decision cycles.	Conceptual backbone for theatreisation and domain-agnostic C2.
<b>Technology Perspective &amp; Capability Roadmap (2025)</b>	MoD guide for long-term capability development.	Prioritises interoperability, network-centric ops, and AI-enabled C4ISR.	Tech underpinning for theatre commands and joint SA.
<b>Joint Logistics Nodes, Mumbai, Guwahati, Port Blair (operational since 1 Jan 2021)</b>	Tri-service logistics consolidation under DMA.	Common supply chains and pooled resources.	Practical enabler and pathfinder for integrated theatre logistics.
<b>Integrated Command-and-Control Network Integration (ongoing)</b>	Fusion of AFNET / NC3I / Tactical C3I.	Real-time data sharing and joint targeting.	Digital backbone for theatre commands and MDO.

**Source:** Author's Compilation

The table highlights the major doctrinal, organisational, and technological initiatives underpinning India's transition toward integrated theatre commands and multi-domain operations. These reforms demonstrate that Theaterisation is not limited to command restructuring alone, but is supported by evolving doctrines, logistics integration, digital command-and-control networks, and interoperability-focused capability development.

### **Joint Doctrines, Tri-Service Exercises, and Professional Military Education**

India has coupled Theaterisation with a sustained push on joint doctrine to standardise concepts, planning norms, and procedures across services. The baseline is the Joint Doctrine of the Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF, 2017)<sup>32</sup> and the Joint Training Doctrine (2017)<sup>33</sup>, which codified principles of integrated planning, effects-based operations, and common staff processes. Building on this, India has issued updated functional joint doctrines (e.g., special operations, airborne/heliborne, cyber and space employment) and, most recently, a Joint Doctrine for Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) aligned to a Technology Perspective & Capability Roadmap, intended to synchronise land, maritime, air, space, cyber, electromagnetic and information activities under unified command.<sup>34</sup> These publications are reinforced by tri-service directives from the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) to harmonise targeting, ISR fusion, logistics, air defence integration, and joint fires, precisely the staff interfaces that theatre commands will rely upon. In parallel, India has operationalised Joint Logistics Nodes and integrated command-and-control networks (e.g., air-defence C2 linked to Army and naval sensors) to give doctrine practical teeth in peacetime and during rapid transition to operations.

Most recently, at the Combined Commanders' Conference (CCC-2025) in Kolkata, India, a Joint Military Space Doctrine was released as part of its Theaterisation and multi-domain integration drive.<sup>35</sup> The document aims to formally embed space operations into India's defence planning, enabling the three services – Army, Navy, and Air Force – to synchronise their space-based capabilities (satellites, sensors, tracking, space situational awareness) with conventional operations. It also addresses emerging threats to space assets, such as jamming, space denial, and anti-satellite weapons, and mandates joint planning, operational readiness, and command frameworks for space missions. This doctrine builds on earlier tri-service initiatives (like the Defence Space Agency and prior joint doctrine releases) to provide legal, operational, and institutional coherence across domains.

On the training and exercise side, India has elevated tri-service field validation as the bridge between doctrine and capability. Large joint exercises, such as AMPHEX, KAVACH, and high-visibility tri-service firepower demonstrations (e.g., BHARAT SHAKTI at Pokhran), have rehearsed integrated entry, lodgement, joint fires, and logistics sustainment at scale.

Service-level drills now include cross-attachments and common scenarios, while IBG validations are run with air and maritime enablers to compress mobilisation timelines. This field work is underwritten by Professional Military Education (PME) reforms: the Defence Services Staff College (Wellington), National Defence College (New Delhi), College of Defence Management (Secunderabad), and the Military Institute of Technology (Pune) have expanded joint staff courses and common curricula, pushing joint planning tools, wargaming, red-teaming, and multi-domain staff procedures down to mid-career officers.<sup>36</sup>

The result is a steady doctrine-training-exercise cycle designed to normalise tri-service planning and execution ahead of full theatre command roll-out. In addition to structural and doctrinal reforms, India has also introduced symbolic personnel measures to reinforce jointness at the highest levels of military leadership. In a podcast interview with ANI, India's Chief of Army Staff, General Upendra Dwivedi, acknowledged this cultural shift, that the personal aides (ADCs) to the service chiefs will henceforth be drawn from sister services, rather than their own branch. Thus, the Army Chief will now have an Air Force officer, the Navy Chief an Army officer, and the Air Force Chief a Naval officer as their respective aides.<sup>37</sup> Although largely symbolic, this change is important because it reflects a deliberate effort to erode long-standing service silos and expose officers to inter-service cultures from the earliest stages of their careers.

## Challenges to Theatre Commands

India's move toward integrated theatre commands continues to face structural, institutional, and conceptual hurdles. The most prominent resistance has come from within the services, particularly the Indian Air Force (IAF). Air Chief Marshal A. P. Singh, in August 2025, cautioned against "rushing into theaterisation," arguing that India "should not be inspired by the U.S. model" and instead must "think about what we need... otherwise, we will go wrong." He further suggested that disrupting existing structures prematurely "is not a very good idea," proposing a joint planning and coordination hub under the Chiefs of Staff Committee instead. This reflects the IAF's long-standing apprehension that a single unified command may dilute its operational autonomy and stretch its limited resources.

The complexity of the implementation is also recognised by the army leadership, though it is generally supportive. In September 2025, Chief General of the Army General Upendra Dwivedi highlighted that "theatrisation is very important and is needed... we need only one commander for execution, but have to see how much time is needed to get to it." His statements emphasise the incremental nature of the change, which will require massive investment of time, training, and the redirection of resources. The institutional differences still indicate lingering issues, such as design of command and control, inter-service rivalry, integration of technology, and standardisation of logistics, that hinder unanimity on the ultimate form of the theatre commands in India.

## **Pakistan's Threat Perception**

Islamabad views the integrated theatre commands of India as an eventual destabiliser for deterrence stability in the South Asian region. Consolidation of a Western Theatre Command is considered an effort to improve Indian operational capability in support of its pro-active doctrine, and this has raised concerns that New Delhi may launch rapid, limited offensives aimed at taking advantage of perceived vulnerabilities in Pakistani response timelines.

Theatre commands are therefore considered as force multipliers that might reduce the barrier to military adventurism and increase crisis instability. The theatreisation is closely associated with the Cold Start Doctrine (or Proactive Strategy), which considers shallow incursions along the Western Front to capture limited ground before Pakistan can mount a full response or even before the international intervention. The doctrine assumes that Pakistan would not respond to such a limited incursion by using nuclear weapons and thus establishing a putative space of conventional war under a nuclear overhang. Meanwhile, Islamabad denies this assumption as destabilising and points out that Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) was explicitly created to deprive such a space.

In addition, the Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQP) strategy provides the opportunity to respond proportionately, in a flexible manner, to scale, in case an opponent crosses certain thresholds. QPQP is a conventional strategy that augments the overall strategy by refusing the enemy any notion of a cost-free, contained conventional war. Theatreisation is seen as an attempt to erode the deterrence of Pakistan by improving the operational capability of India. A coherent Western Command would be in a position to roll out IBGs with close air support in lesser time spans, thus creating the threat of short-term operations with localised gain.

The posture of the Indian forces also supports this perception: before the crisis in Ladakh, India stationed approximately 25 divisions against Pakistan and 12 against China; only after the standoff in 2020-21, New Delhi considered modestly re-balancing its forces, placing 21 divisions at the West and 16 at the East.<sup>38</sup> This asymmetry underscores Pakistan's belief that, despite Indian rhetoric on countering China, Pakistan remains the central focus of Indian military planning.

## **Implications for Deterrence Stability**

Theaterisation in South Asia is radically changing the conditions of deterrence by altering India's calculus around the prospect of limited conflict under the nuclear shadow. Deterrence stability rests on the idea that neither side should have an incentive to launch a first strike in a conflict, as any major conflict would trigger assured retaliation and therefore be strategically unsuited. India's shift towards theatreisation is changing this dynamic as it leads to quicker and more integrated military actions. For Pakistan, this raises the dangerous belief that India could conduct a swift, decisive conflict while avoiding nuclear escalation."<sup>39</sup>

Three factors play a major role in destabilising deterrence. The first is time compression. Theatre commanders, relying on real-time Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and precision strike platforms, and efficient logistics, can order operations that outpace political processes of crisis management. This places time constraints on Pakistan's ability to signal its intentions, adjust its posture or undertake diplomatic efforts to de-escalate, thereby increasing the likelihood of miscalculation, over-reaction or pre-emption.

Entanglement stands out as another serious source of instability. The nature of the modern war, which covers all of land, sea, air, space and cyberspace, can make it challenging to separate targets for conventional and nuclear weapons. Dual-use capabilities - such as satellites, data links, cyber and electronic warfare - play a role in conventional operations and nuclear command, control and early warning. Any attack or interference with these dual-use assets can be interpreted in multiple ways, heightening warnings and potentially leading to escalation. Risk displacement emerges as the third key challenge. A military leadership that feels assured by its multi-layered air and missile defence, high-precision long-range capabilities, and integrated theatre-level architecture may be emboldened to take punitive measures, fostering a dangerous optimism about escalation control. In Pakistan's case, this optimism fails to account for the ease with which political, media and the inherent unpredictability of war can escalate a "limited" conflict into a major engagement.

In this regard, Pakistan's Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) is the primary check on such confidence. FSD aims to inflict sufficient costs at various escalation thresholds, preventing Indian planners from expecting a unilateral advantage in the use of force. Pakistan has shown its resolve in this regard in a proportionate manner, such as during the 2019 aerial skirmish and the May 2025 crisis.

Simultaneously, Pakistan is working to increase the resilience of its deterrent assets to eliminate the possibility of successful counterforce operations. This involves greater mobility, dispersion, target hardening, deception, and variety in land, sea and air delivery systems. Improving nuclear command, control, and communications (NC<sub>3</sub>) systems seek to maintain options for retaliation under conditions of short time frames and electronic attack. The recent Operation Sindhoor in 2025 is an example of Pakistan's holistic defence and highlights the risks of assuming conflict can be limited.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond this, Theaterisation places both psychological and operational strain on the existing strategic environment. Centralising operational command in the hands of a select few theatre commanders, with powerful and responsive capabilities, may encourage risk-taking during crises. The faster tempo of operations constrains Pakistan's decision-making and minimises the prospect of early diplomacy. As a result, Pakistan emphasises the importance of crisis communication, including secure political and military hotlines and pre-emptive signalling to the international community to reduce the escalation risk.

However, while Theaterisation does not rule out deterrence in South Asia, it makes it more fragile. Political decision-making takes place under time pressure; the distinctions between conventional and nuclear targets become blurred; and one side develops greater capabilities to maintain limited conflict. Pakistan's objective, therefore, is to maintain a deterrent posture that removes beliefs in manageable conflict and foster crisis management approaches that slow down escalation and allow greater political time.

## **Pakistan's Responses and Options**

Faced with India's Theaterisation, Pakistan is readying a mix of military, technological and diplomatic responses to ensure its security. The guiding principle is to maintain credible deterrence across the spectrum of conflict and ensure that the modernisation program stays within the realm of credible minimum deterrence and does not make unsustainable commitments that would place a strain on the economy.

## **Enhancing Jointness**

The recent changes in Pakistan's command structure represent a significant milestone in its efforts for joint planning, multi-dimensional integration and deterrence management. The removal of the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) in the 27<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment and the promotion of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) to the rank of Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) represent a shift towards a more unified command structure in Pakistan. The CDF now exercises integrated command of the Army, Navy and Air Force, which is designed to facilitate tri-service integration and reduce decision-making time in rapidly evolving situations. Similarly, the creation of a four-star position of the Commander National Strategic Command (CNSC), which oversees strategic, multi-domain and nuclear deterrence operations, suggests an attempt to enhance oversight and ensure continuity in managing Pakistan's strategic capabilities. The CNSC's tenure and direct nomination by the Prime Minister on the recommendation of the CDF formalise a more consistent command structure for readiness and survivability for Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and crisis management. These changes, therefore, suggest Pakistan's efforts to update its command structure while sidestepping India's experiment with theatre commands, and to ensure its nuclear deterrence posture is credible, survivable and adaptable to changing regional circumstances.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, in January 2025, Pakistan launched its first joint pre-commission training program at the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA), Kakul. For the first time, cadets of the Army (485), Navy (111), and Air Force (42) took the oath together, representing the 154<sup>th</sup> Long Course, 37<sup>th</sup> TGC, 70<sup>th</sup> Integrated Course, and 25<sup>th</sup> LCC. This reform embeds jointness into professional culture at the earliest stage of careers.<sup>42</sup> Beyond cadet training, the National Defence University (NDU) and Defence Services institutions are expanding joint curricula, wargaming, and multi-domain operational training to prepare officers for integrated operations.

## Modernising and Balancing Conventional Forces

Recognising that Indian integration could improve the pace of operations, Pakistan is pursuing selective, targeted modernisation. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has prioritised the induction of JF-17 Block III fighters with AESA radar and long-range strike weapons, and the operationalisation of J-10C squadrons to maintain balance against India's Rafales.<sup>43</sup> In June 2025, Janes confirmed Chinese agreement to supply the Shenyang FC-31/J-35 stealth fighter to Pakistan, a prospective induction, not yet in service, but part of forward-looking planning.<sup>44</sup>

Air and missile defence has also been upgraded. The HQ-9BE long-range SAM system is now operational, covering critical sites, while China has reportedly offered the HQ-19 theatre missile defence system with exo-atmospheric intercept capability, still at the proposal stage.<sup>45</sup>

On land, the Army is inducting VT-4 main battle tanks,<sup>46</sup> SH-15 artillery,<sup>47</sup> and modern MLRS platforms, alongside indigenous upgrades to armoured and mechanised formations. The creation of the Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) in August 2025 unified conventional rocket and missile forces under GHQ for rapid interdiction, giving Pakistan a responsive long-range strike option distinct from nuclear forces.<sup>48</sup>

At sea, the Hangor-class submarine program (4 built in China, 4 at KSEW in Karachi) is progressing with key milestones through 2024-25.<sup>49</sup> These submarines, combined with anti-ship cruise missiles, provide sea-denial capacity against Indian surface and carrier groups in the Arabian Sea. Rather than symmetric fleet expansion, the Pakistan Navy emphasises cost-effective asymmetric deterrence at sea.

In addition, cyber defence and electronic warfare units are being strengthened to degrade India's reliance on tightly networked theatre commands. Pakistan is also expanding ISR with UAVs like Shahpar series and a satellite program with China. This improves early warning capabilities and crisis response, without straining resources.

## Refining Deterrence Posture

Pakistan is further strengthening Full Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) under the policy of credible minimum deterrence. This guarantees coverage of all escalation levels, strategic, operational and tactical. Readiness and survivability are ensured by a mix of nuclear delivery systems, land, air and sea, providing a second-strike capability.

The Nasr (Hatf-IX) tactical nuclear missile is the most obvious demonstration of Pakistan's commitment to preventing a limited war with India. The establishment of the new Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) provides an additional conventional platform that allows for more nuanced responses and elevates the nuclear threshold by allowing the employment of conventional rockets to be separated from the nuclear-capable forces under the Strategic Plans Division (SPD).<sup>50</sup>

In this regard, Lieutenant General Khalid Ahmed Kidwai (Retired) has said the creation of the Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) provides another dimension of strategic deterrence between the conventional and potential use of nuclear weapons. This enhances crisis stability by increasing the nuclear threshold whilst preserving the nuclear deterrent as the ultimate bulwark against India. He further underscored that Pakistan's FSD is credible in both eastern and western directions, and unlike India, Pakistan has consistently demonstrated restraint and responsibility as central pillars of its nuclear policy.

Pakistan's Nuclear Command and control remain centralized with the National Command Authority (NCA),<sup>51</sup> which has consistently stressed restraint and responsibility. Public ambiguity on thresholds is maintained, though officials have reiterated Pakistan's rejection of a "no first use" pledge and the readiness to employ "all means necessary" for defence. This signalling is intended to prevent misperception in New Delhi that actions such as Theaterisation create room for a limited, containable conflict.

## **Diplomatic and Strategic Cooperation**

Pakistan has consistently highlighted in international forums that Indian military modernisation threatens deterrence stability by compressing timelines and lowering thresholds for war. During crises, Islamabad engages major powers rapidly to mobilise pressure for de-escalation while underscoring its own responsible posture.<sup>52</sup> Regionally, partnership with China remains the cornerstone of Pakistan's security strategy, including conventional arms collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises. An additional fillip came on 17 September 2025 with the signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, elevating decades of security cooperation to a collective defence agreement.<sup>53</sup> This pact promises financial assistance for capabilities, industrial partnerships, and influence in the Gulf.

## **Public Diplomacy**

Public Diplomacy Pakistan's strategy includes communication campaigns. In the information space, Pakistan highlights its defensive posture, nuclear responsibility and status quo power status. The aim is to cast Indian activities as aggressive and provocative. Domestically, its resolve and determination are built through media engagement and exercises. Externally, Pakistan highlights its restraint and proportionality, such as during the 2019 air engagement to counter India's aggression.<sup>54</sup> The reputation of being a responsible nuclear power adds to Pakistan's influence, especially during rapid-movement crises.

## Conclusion

The shift towards integrated military theatre commands is not merely a change in the organisational structure of the Indian armed forces, but also a major change in how India conducts joint warfare, rapid force employment, and multi-domain operations. This study has suggested that Theaterisation has significant implications for deterrence stability in South Asia, as it would enable India to carry out faster and more coordinated conventional operations with a compressed timeline. Specifically, the planned Western Theatre Command is seen in Pakistan in close conjunction with India's pursuit of limited-war options within the framework of the "nuclear overhang". The paper concludes that while theatreising can be useful during certain situations, it can also exacerbate strategic instability by cutting down on warning time, narrowing the political decision-making space, and escalating tensions during crises. Integrated command structures, ISR fusion, precision-strike capabilities and delegated operational authority can provide incentives for swift military action prior to diplomatic de-escalation measures. Such developments increase the risk of misperception and miscalculation in a nuclearised environment like South Asia.

Meanwhile, the research shows how Pakistan's deterrence posture is still influencing the regional strategic dynamics. The focus on Full Spectrum Deterrence, Joint Operational Preparedness, Survivability Measures and Conventional Denial Capabilities indicates that Pakistan is trying to thwart any latent operational space for limited war. The recent institutional and operational changes such as inter-service integration, enhancement of rapid response capability, and formation of the Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) suggest that Pakistan's defence posture is a response to the changing realities within the region, as it continues to strive to maintain credible deterrence and strategic stability. The broader implication is that military modernisation and organisational integration in South Asia cannot be viewed solely through the lens of operational efficiency. Considering the ongoing conflicts and the recurrent crisis in the region, structural military reforms have a direct impact on escalation dynamics and crisis stability. The rising tempo and integration of military operations could further restrict opportunities for crisis management between two nuclear-armed states, unless accompanied by effective communication channels, confidence-building measures and continued political engagement.

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