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The pitfalls of joint warfare: Conjoined or Separated?

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9 December 2009

Joint operations, currently so in vogue, is a fine enough concept around which military organisations can structure their forces. However, military planners need to remember that the joint operations principle should not be adopted at the expense of single service competencies.

FOR MILITARY organisations, the top tune has, since the 1980s, been the concept of joint warfare. The US government deemed it so important that it passed the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganisation Act in 1986, mandating the US military to re-organise along joint principles. The SAF, in its current 3G transformational agenda, places joint warfare capabilities as the central required competency.

History of Joint warfare

The idea of the different services cooperating towards a single strategic end state is not a recent phenomenon. As far back as the Greco-Persian wars of European antiquity, the symbiosis between land and naval power was already evident. The Persian army led by its king Xerxes was eventually defeated at Plataea by a combined army of Greek city-states, but the seeds of this defeat were sown in the Persian defeat at the naval battle of Salamis. This naval defeat cost Xerxes his logistics lines of resupply, and his army was badly decimated by the ensuing Greek winter. Winston Churchill attributed the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany to the battle for the Atlantic: by securing sea lines of communication across the Atlantic, American military power was finally able to be brought to bear in the theatre of operations that really mattered -- the European continent.

However, important as joint warfare is to strategic success, this should not mean that the 'joint' supersedes the 'service'. This is especially in the area of military training, which provides all levels of the military organisation with the necessary skill sets upon which successful military planning and operations are based. Competency at joint operations is ultimately dependent on core competencies at the individual services.

‘Joint’ as a State of Mind

First of all, joint warfare is as much a state of mind as it is an actuality. Military commanders, in thinking ‘joint’, seek to maximise the strategic effect that the limited military resources at their disposal can afford. Therefore, rather than be blinded by their individual service loyalties, commanders ought to be sensitised to the possibility that different services might make a signal contribution to the overall effort.

Military operations however must not be joint simply for the sake of it. If a single service can achieve the desired strategic effect, this ought not to be sacrificed for the principle of joint operations, desirable and even necessary as the principle may be. Nor should a commander give prominence based on his service loyalty to a service in a campaign or operation. For any operation, if commanders deem a particular service to assume the central role, it is because these commanders have made a rational assessment that the peculiar conditions of the operation point to that service assuming this dominant position.

Service Competency as Foundation

Secondly, military organisations need to remember that individual service competency is the foundation for successful joint operations. Service competencies precede joint competencies. In the realm of military training, therefore, there ought to be equal emphasis on both joint and individual service levels. Different levels of commander training, however, place different requirements for this ‘joint’ state of mind. The emphasis on service-level and joint-level skill sets ought to come at different times.

If this argument is correct, this then has implications for the way in which military training and education for military commanders is implemented. At the basic levels of commander training and education, the emphasis ought to be placed on service-level skill sets. If any joint-level training is necessary at basic levels, it is to inculcate the state-of-mind, the awareness that one’s service is not the be-all and end-all of one’s military career; that even lower-level commanders ought to be at least sensitised to the possibilities that the other services offer to military operations. It is really at higher levels of training and education where the focus ought to be on acquiring the skill sets necessary for joint operations and warfare.

Continued Primacy of the Land Component

Finally, military planners ought to remember the counsel of the maritime strategist Julian Stafford Corbett about the primacy of the land; it is almost always how military power affects the situation ‘on the ground’ that is vital to the strategic end game. This is not to say that the air and naval services are strategically irrelevant. Nor is it to say that the land force component alone is the necessary and sufficient condition for strategic success at war. Corbett’s point is this: more often than not, commanding the air and naval domains is strategically relevant only because it provides the platform from which land power can be projected against the heartland of the opponent. As military history has shown us, victory on the land is often impossible without dominance in either the air or naval domains.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the experience of World War Two.

It was entirely appropriate that Nimitz assumed central command of American military operations in the central Pacific during World War Two, given the overwhelming prominence of the maritime conditions. But the whole point of the campaigns to retake islands like Guam or Wake or Iwo Jima was to seize platforms from which air power could be brought to bear, decisively as it turned out, against the Japanese homeland. And for these islands to be retaken, land power had to be brought to

bear. The iconic image of Iwo Jima is of soldiers under fire hoisting up the Stars and Stripes. And the ultimate iconic image of victory in the Pacific is of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima. Each service contributed, but in its own unique way. That, ultimately, may be the true value of joint warfare.

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