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Army to raise dedicated cyber operations wings in all commands, with an eye on China

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NEW DELHI: With China's potent cyber-warfare and cyber-espionage capabilities posing a clear and present danger, the Indian Army will now raise dedicated specialized agencies in each of its six operational or regional commands across the country to handle the cyberspace domain.

The 12-lakh strong Army has also earmarked "lead directorates" and "test-bed formations" to handle the ongoing induction as well as evolve operational philosophies for "niche technologies" like drones, drone swarms, counter-drone systems, loitering weapons, artificial intelligence-enabled systems, electronic warfare and the like.

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These decisions were taken during the Army commanders' conference last week. "With the Army's rapid migration towards net centricity, which entails an increased reliance on modern communication systems at all levels, the conference reviewed the requirement to safeguard networks and decided to operationalise the Command Cyber Operations and Support Wings (CCOSWs) in the immediate future," an officer said on Thursday. This is an urgent necessity in the backdrop of China developing a wide array of cyberweapons to degrade or

destroy an adversary's military assets and strategic networks as well as energy, banking, transport and communication grids even before the actual kinetic war kicks off.

China also regularly engages in malicious cyber activities as well as exploits cyberspace for its "grey zone warfare", which basically revolves exploiting the operational space between peace and war to change the status quo or coerce an adversary.

The Army believes the CCOSWs will help to safeguard its networks and increase the preparedness levels in this fifth dimension of warfare after land, sea, air and space. The step will lead to an overall strengthening of the cyber-security posture of the force for both conventional operations as well as grey zone warfare, an officer said.

India has so far lagged far behind in developing cyberwarfare capabilities. The government in 2019 only approved the creation of only a small tri-service Defence Cyber Agency (DCA) at the apex level instead of the full-fledged Cyber Command that the armed forces wanted.

China, in contrast, has a major Strategic Support Force to oversee the People's Liberation Army's space, cyber and electronic warfare operations. The US, too, has a huge Cyber Command, led by a four-star general, to launch a "full spectrum" war if required as well as protect over 15,000 American military networks from attacks round-the-clock.

As for niche technologies, the Army says requisite force structures are required to "optimally exploit" the large number and variety of equipment being inducted to enhance the fighting potential of field formations.

"Seamless exploitation of the niche tech-enabled equipment will also need refinement of the existing TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures) and maintenance or sustenance philosophies," an officer said.

With the sheer operational utility of drones being reinforced by the Armenia-Azerbaijan and Russia-Ukraine conflicts, the Army has recently gone in for the procurement of a wide variety of unmanned aerial vehicles. These range from nano, mini and micro drones to kamikaze, logistics, armed swarms, surveillance quadcopters and remotely-piloted aircraft systems for the infantry, artillery, special forces and the like, as reported by TOI earlier.