
Indian Special Forces: 2030

PC Katoch

An extremist takeover of Pakistan is probably no further than five to 10 years away.

— Pervez Hoodbhoy, August 2011

Globally, special forces are being used to further national interests of parent countries. As a matter of fact, their employment is an extension of the foreign policy of the concerned country. The leading nations employing special forces proactively trans-frontiers are perhaps the USA, Russia, UK and Israel. US Special Forces (USSF) are operating in some 200 countries. This is in addition to almost all diplomatic missions in foreign countries having USSF presence. Since China has already positioned People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops in Pakistan, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Seychelles and other countries in the garb of workers and technicians of development projects, we can safely posit a sizeable section being special forces. Pakistan has employed the Special Service Group (SSG) actively in Afghanistan, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Nepal and Bangladesh, and is forging links with extremist / terrorist organisations in India.

Threat Perceptions in the Future

India is already amidst asymmetric wars waged by both Pakistan and China. The actual rulers of Pakistan, the military-ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), have indicated time and again in unambiguous terms that they will not dispense with the policy of terror. Amir Mir wrote in the *Asia Times* on September 2, 2011, "The resurgence of the Jaish-e-Mohammad shows that the Pakistani establishment remains deeply embroiled with its *jihadi* proxies and continues to treat them as the civilian face of the Pakistani Army". India will continue to be targeted repeatedly because our

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hierarchy fails to interpret the writing on the wall and our intelligence set-up has been rendered impotent due to intransigence, misplaced focus, inability to synergise and dysfunctional centre-state relationships. Terror in the Af-Pak (Afghanistan-Pakistan) region will hot up increasingly as the International Security Assistance Force/North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (ISAF/NATO) pull out and US forces thin out from Afghanistan. China may be feeling the pinpricks of terror herself but her support to Pakistan's *jihadi*

policy against India is unlikely to abate. Tying down a considerable part of the Indian security establishment in J&K suits her beautifully. The aggressiveness shown by the PLA in recent months portends dark events to follow. We have some 29 odd terrorist organisations operating in the country and the Maoists are increasing their capacity to heighten conflict. Future threats include accelerated asymmetric wars, terrorism and insurgencies and a heightened collusive China-Pak threat, including a conventional war in a nuclear backdrop. There will be a certain overlap between conventional and asymmetric war. With technological advances and emerging doctrines, we need to be very clear on the nature of future wars and develop the capability to perceive and mitigate emerging threats in time. The domains of war will include land, sea, aerospace, electro-magnetic and cyber. India is lagging horribly in capacity building in the latter two domains and is at a distinct disadvantage in coping with asymmetric war.

Future threat perceptions will continue to be dominated by the sub-conventional and relate more to non-state actors (a euphemism in the case of Pakistan) albeit conventional war under the nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) backdrop will remain a possibility. It will be increasingly difficult to pinpoint external support. The national focus appears to have gone awry and much effort will be needed to get it back. James Lamont and Amy Kazmin, in a report in the *Financial Express* of September 7, 2011, have quoted K Shankar Bajpai, chairman of India's National Security Advisory Board and former ambassador to the US, as stating, "The instruments of state action have become dysfunctional." India's strategic interests extend between the Suez to Shanghai "... but we have neither the manpower nor the strategic thinking to handle these challenges." In the absence of institutionalised strategic thinking, our only response is to raise more and more police forces (sans proper equipment and training facilities) to barricade ourselves like the proverbial ostrich. Military modernisation, with the exponentially widening capacity gap compared to the

PLA, does little to help threat mitigation. The Indian state continues its strategically comatose posture even as infiltration attempts in J&K have increased exponentially, Mumbai and Delhi suffered terrorist strikes (13/7 and 7/9 respectively) and the PLA keeps breaking our bunkers on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), accompanied by rampant random border reconnaissance by Chinese nationals. The US will remain handicapped in exerting adequate pressure on Pakistan to root out terror since the US still needs Pakistan to extricate itself with a modicum of pride from Afghanistan, and the inevitable residual US presence in Afghanistan in the foreseeable future beyond 2014 will still need to be maintained through the land route via Pakistan.

Indian Special Forces

India has a reasonable number of special forces but, unfortunately, the hierarchal understanding of their trans-border employment is the short distance, physical or direct type of actions executed on a unit/sub-unit basis. There is no concept of special forces being used abroad other than in a conventional war and UN missions. Their potential in asymmetric wars to further national security objectives is not understood by the national hierarchy. Special forces should actually be central to our asymmetric response, which does not necessarily imply operating in units/sub-units. In most case, such a special forces response does not even automatically relate to a physical attack – a physical attack being only the extreme and potentially most dangerous expression of asymmetric warfare. The key lies in achieving strategic objectives through the application of modest resources with the essential psychological component. Stephen Cohen aptly summed up the concept when he wrote in his book *The Idea of Pakistan*, “The task of Special Forces is the proxy application of force at low and precisely calculated levels, the objective being to achieve some political effect, not a battlefield victory.” In sharp contrast, in India, we have simply been looking at battlefield victory.

We have a variety of special forces. The army has eight parachute (special forces) battalions, with another two planned to be raised. The navy has marine commandos (MARCOS) while the air force has named its special forces as the ‘Garud’. The National Security Guard (NSG) functioning under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) till the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack had two Special Action Groups (SAGs) comprising 100 percent army personnel on deputation, while the two Special Ranger Groups (SRGs) comprising Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) personnel on deputation are in a support role, primarily to provide cordons (the NSG did not take any SRG with them for the 26/11 action). Post 26/11, the NSG has expanded manifold albeit with much less contribution from the army, particularly

against the demand of provisioning some 434 additional officers. An NSG hub has come up at Mumbai and a similar hub is being established in Kolkata. Plans to add two more SAGs and an equal number of SRGs have been toned down to one SAG and one SRG for the present. Then there are the Special Groups (SGs) of the Special Frontier Force (SFF) operating directly under the Cabinet Secretariat. All these forces (less the SRGs) are actually what comprise the special forces of India though mostly the difference between “special forces” and “special operation forces (SOF)” is little understood and the media reports all and sundry as special forces, including the entire NSG, parachute units of the Army and SFF, Special Protection Group (SPG), various task forces of the police like Special Task Forces (STF), Special Operations Groups (SOGs), Force One of Maharashtra, Grey Hounds, Cobra, Octopus, Straco, CCB, SSG, Anti-Guerrilla Force, National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), Railway Protection Force Commandos (RPFC) and what have you.

In the early Nineties, the then Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat had put up a proposal to the Ministry of Defence (MoD) for integrating the special forces of the Services; however, it did not see the light of the day as the air force then had no special forces and the army was not in agreement. A little prior to that, the SAGs of the NSG were proposed to be placed under the command of the army but the army did not agree, not wanting to take on the additional responsibility of anti-hijacking. The various Indian special forces have little synergy which has not permitted optimisation of their potent combat capabilities. This has resulted in a number of aberrations. There is no “concept for employment of special forces” at the national level despite their existence for the last four decades, and their potential to assist furtherance of national security objective remains unutilised. Not evolving such a concept has a lot to do in our special forces being distributed in penny packets in different organisations – the dilemma being as to who will take the lead to synergise. In turn, it has led to wasting the potential of the special forces in creating a deterrent against irregular/asymmetric warfare, with Pakistan continuing with its policy of a ‘thousand cuts’, the discernable meddling by China in our northeast, and the Maoist insurgencies. Belonging to different organisations, with different chains of command, there is little commonality in our special forces by way of ethos, training, equipment, capabilities, etc. The record of anti-hijacking operations in the country has been dismal to say the least.

Varied command and control channels leave the hierarchy confused as to which force is trained for what capacity. For example, during 26/11, while the NSG had its own problems of take-off (absence of psychologist/negotiator et al), the decision-makers were unaware that the SG of the SFF is also trained for anti-hijack

operations. Little joint training of special forces is being conducted save feeble effort towards this for the special forces of the Services by Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS). The army special forces and the SG of the SFF would both be employed trans-border in a conventional conflict, especially with both having airborne capability, yet there is no joint training between the two. The Services too have not seriously looked at creating “support elements” for the respective special forces primarily because adequate thought has not been given to strategic tasking and politico-military missions.

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Major voids exist in strategic intelligence. Dependence on technical intelligence (TECHINT) by itself, as followed in India, cannot meet the national requirements in their entirety. Our areas of strategic interests need to be kept under surveillance through human intelligence (HUMINT), to which special forces can be major contributors.

The combined strength of the Indian special forces is much more than the uniformed strength of the total USSF but with not even one-tenth of their capabilities. Ignoring the four globally acknowledged special forces truths (Humans are More Important than Hardware; Quality is Better than Quantity; Special Forces Cannot be Mass Produced; Competent Special Forces Cannot be Created after Emergencies Arise), we have gone in for rapid expansion of our special forces, diluting their combat potential in terms of manning, equipping and training. Even in the peak period of special forces deployment in Iraq, only about 900 to 1,000 USSF were actually used. Expansion of special forces has been very deliberate in the case of foreign armies but India has been erratically converse, especially after each crisis situation. Apprehension of loss of turf is a major impediment in bringing all the special forces under one umbrella. The Services are also faced with needless fear of loss of control if employment is centrally controlled. Has the USSF gone under the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)? Has the SSG of Pakistan gone under the ISI? The answer is no. Then there are the twin impediments of ‘political will’ and ‘fear of failure’. Developing political will is certainly going to be a problem in the present hierarchal dispensation unless unprecedented enemy action, including acceleration of asymmetric/irregular war, awakens the decision-makers.

An urgent requirement is to establish an Integrated Special Forces Command with both publicised overt capabilities (to serve as deterrence) and deniable covert capabilities.

Moving Towards 2030

It should be a matter of grave national concern to us that organisations like the Lashkar-e-Tayyeba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) conduct open meetings with complete state support in Pakistan, that individuals like Hafiz Syed (LeT) and Masood Azhar (JeM) continue to be at large after causing tremendous damage in our country, that the LeT has become as dangerous an organisation as Al Qaeda and JeM is being boosted by the Pakistani military to attain similar dangerous levels, that the *jihadi* strategy of Pakistani will get a boost with the graduated US withdrawal from Afghanistan even

though total US withdrawal may not take place for the next few decades, that China is fuelling dissent in our northeast and among the Maoists, is getting provocatively assertive, including demolishing bunkers on our borders and is sending Chinese nationals on deliberate reconnaissance missions to our borders even with forged Indian identifications to meet insurgent leaders in India with apparent intentions of preparing the ground for a full-fledged fourth generation war, concurrent to her strategic footprints in POK, Pakistan, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and her claim to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. The asymmetric wars of China and Pakistan are aimed to weaken our economy and national will. Assessments made by the RAND Corporation in the late 1990s had indicated that China would get militarily assertive 2010 onwards. Concurrent to that prophecy, Indian think-tanks had recommended that India be prepared for such an eventuality, to which we have failed give the requisite heed. Now the Pentagon is warning that the PLA will turn out to be one of the most modern and formidable forces by the end of this decade (2020) but we continue to be ambivalent by all indications. The media reports that even the proposal for a mountain strike corps costing some Rs 12,000 crore has been shot down while concurrently the comptroller and auditor general (CAG) has been questioning the thousands of crores officially spent on various poverty alleviation schemes that have not reached the intended beneficiaries. With the emerging explosive strategic environment, we may be facing open confrontation jointly with China and Pakistan much before 2030. What should be of paramount concern to us is that the progeny of Sun Tzu and their protégé (Pakistan) would endeavour to win the end game against us without a full-fledged regular war; aside from a limited conflict, war in the cyber and electro-magnetic domains and heightened asymmetric war. Both China and Pakistan

are increasing their grip on our fault lines. The more this stranglehold increases, the more we will get tied up in knots, with internal turmoil and conflicts. This is an even bigger danger than regular war.

We need integration of our considerable special forces potential for a better response to modern-day challenges. The highest central agency must oversee their strategic tasking, manning, equipping, training, consolidation, operational and intelligence inputs, inter-agency synergy and the like. The military special forces and the SGs of the SFF must primarily look outwards in response to trans-national asymmetric and fourth generation warfare threats. The NSG must look internally along with the capability to execute trans-frontier anti-hijack operations. An urgent requirement is to establish an Integrated Special Forces Command with both publicised overt capabilities (to serve as deterrence) and deniable covert capabilities in order to create the necessary deterrence against irregular / asymmetric, fourth generation warfare launched by our adversaries. Strategic deployment and strategic tasking of special forces will require the express sanction of the prime minister, akin to the president's sanction in countries like the US and Pakistan. Therefore, the command and control of the special forces with access to real-time national intelligence will need to be well thought out. By 2030, our special forces scene should look as follows:

- A National Policy for Employment of Special Forces in place and implemented.
- An Integrated Special Forces Command (ISFC) established directly under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) integrating the Military Special Forces, Special Group of the SFF and SAGs of the NSG. The ISFC should continue to meet the special forces' requirements of the Services, coordinated through Strategic Special Forces Cells (SSFCs) functioning directly under the Service Chiefs, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS).
- Incognito deployment of special forces in areas of India's strategic interest for strategic surveillance, controlling the fault lines of our adversaries, targeting the sources of cross-border terrorism and continuous shaping of the battlefield in furtherance of national interests and objectives.
- Raising and consolidation of a full-fledged marine corps under the Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC), following which the ANC may be renamed as the Strategic Marine Command (SMC). This must be given due consideration by

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the government as the concept of the ANC looking towards Mainland India for troops will be unworkable in the emerging strategic environment given its vast regional responsibility and the grave possibilities of the Indian Ocean region hotting up.

The main difficulty in establishing the ISFC will be the reluctance of the organisations and agencies presently controlling them; viz the Services, MHA, Cabinet Secretariat. However, the exercise is essential in the present context, akin to the efforts for integrating the nine major intelligence agencies, which is yet to fully take off in the face of stiff opposition. The time is also opportune to regularise the SFF. With a Tibetan origin girl in India already having won the court battle for Indian nationality, regularisation of the SFF is already facilitated— its Tibet born individuals having retired long since. Diplomacy and conventional war by themselves cannot contend with the asymmetric wars of Pakistan and China. Conventional responses to asymmetric threats do not work and merely fortressing one's house is no answer. We need a well thought out coordinated proactive approach. Establishment of the ISFC will be a vital step towards this.

Conclusion

The deteriorating situation in our neighbourhood, increasing asymmetric threats and national security challenges indicate that we will need to continue contending with sub-conventional conflict, actively abetted by our adversaries in addition to its combination with conventional war whenever the latter occurs. The classical concept of use of special forces within Indian borders will not hold good. India has a variety of special forces that have wide applications across the entire spectrum of conflict. They can very well be employed as a controlled response in the emerging strategic environment that is showing signs of escalation. Unfortunately, they have only been used as a tactical tool in conventional war other than counter-insurgency within our borders, save the sole experience as part of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka, where they performed well. We have failed to acknowledge that special forces have ample scope of employment to face the challenges of terrorism, information, asymmetric, NBC warfare and the like. Our special forces are split over various organisations, have different command and control set-ups and continue to expand. The time is more than opportune for India to set up an Integrated Special Forces Command in order to synergise the special forces and optimise their potential.