

SPECIAL OPERATIONS - A CAPABILITY ROADMAP FOR INDIA

Maj Gen AK Dhingra, SM (Retd)*

“Special Forces represent the best of human resources of any armed forces and operate in all domains of conflict with daring and self-sacrifice. They provide the effortless link between the unconventional and irregular forces. Application of Special Forces provides a nation exponential strategic gains, along with deniability.”

- Lt Gen HS Lidder, PVSM, UYSM, YSM, VSM (Retd)

Abstract

India’s rise as a major economic power with increased strategic stakes in its immediate and extended neighbourhood can best be safeguarded by enhancing role of Special Forces to meet our national security interests. Leading nations of the world have employed Special Forces as a highly flexible and low-cost tool of statecraft to achieve political outcomes without resorting to use of conventional forces. The highly successful surgical strikes executed in 2017 brought to fore the potential of Special Forces to deliver at the politico-military strategic level. With the establishment of the Special Operations Division, the willing support of the political leadership to exploit the attributes of unconventional forces is inevitable. By virtue of being a joint force, it needs to be empowered with dedicated intelligence, strategic mobility and advance weaponry to fulfil its mandate to face crisis situations and execute its strategic role in future. In keeping with the security threats posed by our two inimical nuclear

armed neighbours and regional constraints, the restructured Special Forces can achieve enhanced operational efficiency in conventional and hybrid warfare scenarios to meet the emerging challenges.

Introduction

India faces unique security challenges across the entire spectrum of warfighting, ranging from the collective conventional threats posed by hostile nuclear armed China and Pakistan due to unresolved borders, and the continuing internal security threats of proxy war and insurgency in many parts of the country. With multiple threats as above and the nature of conflict itself undergoing major changes by acquiring more dimensions every few years, India's Armed Forces experience the litmus test of their proficiency and professionalism regularly.

Special operations by Special Forces can be characterized as those in support of regular conventional forces at one end, to politico-military sensitive missions executed in hostile environments at the other end of the operational continuum. Leading powers of the world have employed Special Forces as a flexible low-cost tool to achieve desired outcomes without resorting to expensive escalatory armed conflicts. Special operations are aimed to achieve psychological dislocation of adversary's critical assets and being sensitive in peace time, need political oversight at the highest level. They are 'high risk, high gain' missions focused to deliver disproportionate results.

The operational scope of warfare is being transformed by rapid technological progression in computing, cyber, communications, artificial intelligence and aerospace. Further, as we rise to become a major economic power with enhanced strategic and security objectives, our military capabilities will also need to grow proportionately to address the concerns in our areas of interest and influence in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Whatever the future holds, our nation will always require elite forces who can stare danger in the face and overcome the myriad of challenges, to conduct the vast range of special operations and ensure a high degree of national security pro-actively.

Special Operations in the Indian Context

Special Forces of any nation are its elite and are selected, trained and equipped for undertaking tasks across the entire spectrum of conflict on high-risk missions. They are highly skilled to focus on unconventional special operations in politico-military sensitive environments. As their employment is characterized by surprise, low visibility and clandestine nature, they are tools of state-craft ideally utilized below the conventional threshold to meet hybrid and asymmetric challenges.

India's Special Forces trace their origin to Meghdoot Force, an ad hoc Commando unit that was organized with volunteers from various infantry units by Major Megh Singh. This unit conducted successful raids behind the enemy lines in the Indo-Pak War of 1965, and was formally raised as 9 Para Commando in July 1966 with focus of operations in mountainous terrain. In June 1967, the unit was split to form 10 Para Commando and mandated to specialize in desert terrain. Both the units excelled in Indo-Pak War of 1971 with their daring raids at Mandhol (Poonch) and Chachro (Sind).

In 1978, 1 Para, an over 200 years old unit, was converted as an Experimental Commando Wing to become the first Special Forces unit of the Indian Army. These three units were employed extensively in all major operations to include Op Pawan (1987-89), Op Vijay (1999), and regular counter insurgency operations in Jammu & Kashmir and the North Eastern states since the eighties. 1996 saw the formation of the fourth Special Forces unit, 21 PARA (SF) and with the changing operational environment necessitating the felt need for more Special Forces units, 2 PARA, 3 PARA and 4 PARA were converted from their erstwhile airborne role in the early years of 21st century.

Special Forces have conducted successful counter-insurgency operations in Jammu & Kashmir and North Eastern States with renewed vigour and proficiency for more than two decades. Their role, tasking and expectations have increased substantially as a counter-terrorism force, executing clinical pro-active raids and hostage rescue missions. The effective special mission destroying militant camps along the Indo-

Myanmar border in 2015 and the pre-emptive surgical strikes across Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan occupied Kashmir in 2016, have proven the distinct ethos and motivation of these gallant teams. The brief history of our Special Forces is a saga of courage and valour, led by young professionals with risk-taking abilities and ingenuity in critical missions.

The Indian Army Doctrine defines Special Forces as “Specially selected troops who are trained, equipped and organized to operate in hostile territory, isolated from main combat forces. They may operate independently or in conjunction with other forces at the operational level. They are versatile, have a deep reach, and can make precision strikes at targets of critical importance”. However, the past few years has brought out a realistic assessment that our Special Forces have been utilized sub-optimally on tactical missions routinely, rather than strategic and unconventional missions for high-value targets.

Today, we have a plethora of elite forces within the three Services, National Security Guard, Special Frontier Force and para-military forces with no central authority, leading to duplication of efforts and making them incapable as an effective politico-military tool. These units have valuable combat experience at the tactical level, but their continuous employment has been detrimental to act as a ‘force multiplier’. To optimize the special operations capability in the policy realm, the integration of all Special Forces under a Special Forces Command is inevitable. Lt Gen PC Katoch, a war veteran of the Special Forces has stated that “In sharp contrast, in India, we have been simply looking at battlefield victory. Special Forces units are deployed more on tactical missions rather than the broader, strategic and unconventional missions that should be their charter”.

The potential of Special Forces to serve as an instrument of national policy has not manifested itself mainly due to lack of appropriate command & control structures, rapid proliferation of units, absence of special aviation unit, inadequate high technology equipment and state of the art training facilities. The Special Forces truth that ‘Quality supersedes Quantity’ appears to have been overlooked by planners,

leading to their diluted employment. The raising of a Special Operations Division (SOD) signifies the tremendous support of political hierarchy to undertake major reforms in tasking and employment of Special Forces. Like the 'Lone Sniper', Special Forces can bridge the gap as a political-strategic military tool, provided they are afforded opportunities to execute the mandate to address asymmetric warfare challenges.

Special Operations and Asymmetric Warfare

The US Doctrine for Joint Special Operations defines Special Operations as "Operations conducted by specially organized, trained and equipped military forces to achieve military, political, economic or psychological objectives by unconventional military means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas. These operations are conducted during peacetime competition, conflict, and war, independent or in coordination with operations of conventional, non-special operations forces".

Special Forces play an important role in furthering own national interests and nations have employed them extensively at strategic and operational levels. A foolproof degree of planning, accurate intelligence and detailed preparation is mandatory to ensure desired outcomes. Special Forces employ both direct and indirect approaches to execute allotted missions, maintaining a fine balance between security of plans and extensive coordination with various agencies. A high level of individual, terrain related combat expertise with proficiency in cultural and language skills is inescapable for mission success.

In the recent times, the US Global War on Terror with their Special Forces in the lead in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria have defined the conceptual approach of employment coupled with extensive intervention and power projection techniques. Their unconventional warfare efforts even during the Cold War included psychological and civic action operations throughout the varied interventions. Russia's irregular warfare targets an adversary's weaknesses and avoids direct confrontation with ambiguity and deception as the main strategy that was also implemented in Crimea and Ukraine recently.

Closer home, the Chinese concept of 'Unrestricted Warfare' is well known and its Special Forces are even embedded in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) economic ventures. And Pakistan's Special Services Group (SSG) has demonstrated its adeptness in sub-conventional wars in close coordination with Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), ranging from covert operations supporting Taliban inside Afghanistan to fueling terrorism in India, and its integral participation with Border Action Teams (BAT) on the Line of Control (LoC). The concept of 'Dirty Wars' has blurred the distinction between professional warriors and non-state actors with lack of ethical standards submerged in multiple layers of hybrid warfare.

The Indian experiment in utilizing asymmetric warfare began with the initial raising of Special Frontier Force (SFF) by recruiting Tibetans for 'behind the enemy lines' activities after the 1962 war, but the aim could not be sustained due to a variety of reasons. The birth of Commando battalions after the stupendous success of operations by Meghdoot Force in the 1965 Indo-Pak War has already been amplified. The Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) intervention in Sri Lanka during the years 1987-89 led to intense fighting with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), when trying to demobilize them.

The capacity to wage and combat sub-conventional wars has become an accepted currency of geo-political power, as an adjunct to a nation's foreign policy. Our experiences in utilizing the Special Forces in the sub-conventional domain clearly brings out that we have miles to go before organizing and optimizing their full potential. The rapid expansion of the Special Forces without centralized control, interface with political decision-making and fusion with strategic intelligence is akin to exercising strategic restraint, which is detrimental to our national interests in hybrid war.

Also, the firm response to proxy war by cross-border raids on insurgent camps and launch pads few years ago has been reactive, more as an after-thought than achieving long term strategic dividends. There is little cohesion with intelligence agencies at the apex level, and it

is a proven fact that challenges posed by unconventional threats cannot be met by pure application of conventional forces or diplomacy, further increasing our vulnerabilities.

We need to develop a vision beyond shallow cross-border raids as a credible deterrence by employing Special Forces to meet our strategic interests. Special Forces, in coordination with Cyber, Space and Artificial Intelligence capabilities can provide us a reliable response mechanism to deal with emerging challenges comprehensively. They have the ability to maintain viable surveillance in areas of strategic importance, counter asymmetric wars, control our adversaries' fault-lines and deter them from exploiting irregular warfare, and provide the cutting edge to our decision-makers for strategic force projection as 'Warrior Diplomats'.

Special Operations in Conventional Role

The employment of Special Forces in war is focused on 'shaping the battlefield' with reconnaissance, disruption and dislocation missions to increase friction for the enemy by disproportionate damage to critical assets. The aim to achieve relative superiority through surprise and shock action is the *raison d'être* for Special Forces to execute significant missions in support of conventional operations, by addressing enemy's centre of gravity. However, with conventional wars receding as an option, limited short duration engagements below nuclear threshold with punitive strikes are emerging as likely conflict scenarios.

Against China, the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan bloody skirmish that spiraled out of control last year have presented the same escalatory risks as India-Pakistan LoC, leading to uneasy co-existence and the relationship becoming overtly conflictual in a matter of weeks. Add to this its all-weather support to Pakistan, the friction in maritime domain in the IOR and our hosting the Tibetan government in exile, the current military state of play along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is complete. In the near to medium term, conflict with China will be limited in scope and duration due to a variety of factors. The differences between our territorial posture, climate, terrain, infrastructure differential

and the overall command structure brings out the contrasting approach to warfighting paradigm by the two nations.

China's War Zone Strategy is based on pre-emptive military action with jointness, trans-theatre mobilization, rapid concentration with air, cyber and electronic measures as the backbone of warfighting. We have also augmented our force structure with Mountain Strike Corps and focused on improving the border infrastructure to face a short duration, limited border conflict as the more likely contingency. The nuclear overhang will restrict the scope of scale of conflict and a third-party intervention will be inevitable. Our operational philosophy is to be agile, respond rapidly to developing situations, adopt offensive defence and incorporate area denial measures. The manpower focused approach of a large conventional positional force has to give way to the essential tenet of manoeuvre warfare, by utilizing complementary forces on different axes, trading space for time in the difficult mountainous terrain.

In the above contingency, the Special Forces can be employed for above roles aggressively to act as enablers and launch special warfare in Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). We can implement a nimble proactive strategy by integrating forward deployed Special Forces teams for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and extensive network of Scouts to focus behind the enemy lines to delay, disrupt and interfere with their build-up. However, the Special Forces face challenges to implement strategy of pro-active defence due to lack of centralized control and terrain specialization with operational hurdles. Lack of organic air platforms makes them dysfunctional and their intelligence along with training and procurement needs immediate restructuring.

The political decision makers require to be risk tolerant, as surgical strikes were shallow thrusts but China calls for deeper and extended missions by capable Special Forces. We need to exploit Tibet as a 'trump card' during significant escalation. The uniqueness of Special Forces as shock troops demands to be exploited, as our military structures are tailored for linear attrition warfare compared to manoeuvre

as the hallmark of unconventional warfare campaign. Our operational concepts and approach towards territorial defence with overt reliance on conventional forces calls for re-assessment, as the rugged terrain with lack of infrastructure on the LAC favours more reliance on the Special Forces. In other words, we need to become more of Pakistan and China in our mode of thinking to employ Special Forces as conventional deterrent on LAC.

Way Ahead

India's volatile neighbourhood hemmed with China-Pakistan nexus poses serious hybrid threats to our national security. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan, strategic implications of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), tensions rising in the IOR and Indo-Pacific needs continuous assessment and a flexible response with credible deterrence. While the National Security Strategy (NSS) will foster integrated approach to war fighting, promote national interests and counter weaknesses in long-term procurement and budgetary allocations, a detailed policy to counter sub-conventional threats with timely implementation, monitoring and periodic updating based on changing threat scenarios is inescapable.

As highlighted, both China and Pakistan possess advanced sub-conventional capabilities and are utilizing their Special Forces to great effect to achieve their security objectives. The decision makers need intellectual understanding of strategic value of covert special operations. As an erudite India-Pakistan expert Stephen Cohen said, "The task of Special Forces is proxy application of force at low and precisely calculated levels, the objective being to achieve some political effect, not a battlefield victory."

Special Forces should be central to our asymmetric responses to achieve strategic objectives in hybrid and unconventional missions. The military hierarchy does not see the Special Forces as a substitute for conventional operations and is unable to utilize it as an effective political-military tool because of its focus on internal security. Just as the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 brought about reorganization and

integration of US Armed Forces in a firm time bound manner, we also need to overhaul our archaic security structures. The elephantine pace of reforms and capability build up for executing special operations to counter the current challenges will leave us severely vulnerable in the intervening years.

The early application of SOD can help us to overcome our inability to operate in ambiguous environments to derive maximum political, diplomatic and military outcomes. SOD gives us options to overcome the adverse symmetry by conducting special missions of strategic interest to the country. This force needs to be reinforced with national intelligence agencies, dedicated aerial platforms and advance training facilities with hi-tech special operatives' gear but most importantly, a rightful place in the national hierarchical decision-making structures to oversee its optimal employment.

Looking ahead, a functional Special Operations Command needs to be organized under the National Security Advisor (NSA) to be utilized pro-actively as an effective force multiplier for strategic outcomes. We need to have advisors for special operations in Ministry of Defence, External Affairs and Home as only such positions manned by specialists can optimize our potential. Multiple benefits can be accrued for the nation with the operational philosophy putting greater emphasis on rapidly seizing initiative at the high end of asymmetric warfare. Only a resolute political will and a plan to optimize Special Forces prospects by creating a Special Operations Command to meet multiple challenges of hybrid wars and cross-border terrorism, will create internal stability and meet our long-term strategic interests.

Conclusion

The potential of India's Special Forces to serve as an instrument of national power has not manifested itself appropriately due to a variety of

reasons, and their utilization has been restricted to tactical missions in the last few decades. While the Special Forces have proved their mettle in the challenging combat environments over the last few decades by virtue of their ethos and commitment, they now need to 'reset' their operational philosophy to counter the current challenges. As India grows its national security interests and assets beyond the regional framework to attain its foreign policy objectives in spite of our adversarial neighbours, it will need synergized Special Forces to protect and project our strategic capacities.

Raising of a Tri-service agency has aligned the need for a robust joint force to address multiple security challenges in India's sphere of influence and meet our strategic aspirations. We now need a functional Special Operations Command to exercise centralized command and control over all Special Forces with dedicated intelligence, versatile training, terrain specialization and effective equipment for their optimal exploitation to meet our security, foreign policy and economic interests. The foreseeable uncertain geo-strategic environment therefore, implores India to optimize its Special Forces potential and reinforce it with appropriate foundations of doctrine, policy, structure, organization and employment to meet its national security challenges assertively in future.

***Maj Gen AK Dhingra, SM (Retd)** is former DG AFSOD