

Airborne Operations – Imperative Future Strategic Capability

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The Context

During the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Indian newspapers had reported that the US had deployed 20,000 Special Forces in Afghanistan. Obviously, the difference between airborne operations and special operations was not understood. Factually, these were troops from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions of the US Army, not part of Special Forces. Till recent times, the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) had a strength of only 60,000 troops, of which the cutting edge Special Forces numbered only 15,000, rest being support elements including civilians. Besides, United States Special Forces (USSF) were then operating in some 200 countries, though not fighting in all. The October 2003 Issue of US Army publication 'ARMY' brought out that the largest deployment of US Special Operation Forces (SOF) was during Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' involving 90 Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODA) (each ODA being 8-10 men), surpassing the total number of ODAs engaged at any one time during Vietnam War – about 85. Obviously, Special Forces are not a game of numbers.

After World War II, airborne drops, as part of combat operations have been undertaken in Panama, Vietnam, Grenada, Bangladesh, Falkland, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ivory Coast and Mali.¹ In March 2003, the US 173rd Airborne Brigade was airdropped into northern Iraq. In 2009, Pakistan Army paratroopers conducted airborne operations during Operation 'Black Thunderstorm' and Operation 'Rah-e-Nijjat' in North Waziristan against Pakistani Taliban to seize strategic mountain areas for supporting special forces and infantry. In January 2013, French paratroopers from the 11th Parachute Brigade jumped into northern Mali to support offensive for capturing Timbuktu. In operations like in Falklands, the airborne troops had a much larger role than Special Forces, and it is the paratroopers that covered themselves with glory.

According to 'Pakistan Defence', "Airborne forces are military units, usually light infantry, set up to be moved by aircraft and 'dropped' into battle, typically by parachute.² Thus, they can be placed behind enemy lines, and have the capability to deploy almost anywhere with little warning. The formations are limited only by the number and size of their aircraft, so given enough capacity a huge force can appear 'out of nowhere' in minutes, an action referred to as vertical envelopment." Interesting excerpts from this article in 'Pakistan Defence' on whether Pakistan needs an Airborne Division are as under :—³

(a) To be honest we do lack Paratrooper Division. A division armed with special light arms, airborne vehicles and strategic heavy lifter can be a game changer during the battle. Paratrooping at the start of battle is bit suicidal, but during course of the battle, airdrops can take place behind enemy lines to cease supply lines or whatever mission is given to them.

(b) Do you think world's most sophisticated armies are outdated to have these (Airborne)? First, one has to learn the role of airborne troops and as for effectiveness, in 2009, Pakistan Army paratroopers conducted airborne operations during Operation 'Black Thunderstorm' and Operation 'Rah-e-Nijjat' against Pakistani Taliban to seize strategic mountain areas in support of special forces and infantry. So it still is the fastest way to deploy our troops behind enemy lines.

Four countries, the US, China, France and Russia, maintain division-sized or bigger airborne forces. In addition, another 48 countries across the world maintain brigade-sized or smaller airborne forces, these are : Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Czech Republic, Egypt, Finland, Gabon, Germany, Greece, Honduras, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Netherlands, Poland, Philippines, Portugal, Rhodesia, Serbia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, the UK, Venezuela and Vietnam. China's Wuhan-based 15th Airborne Corps (which remains untouched in the ongoing PLA reorganisation) comprises the following:-⁴

- (a) 43rd Airborne Division, Kaifeng; 127th, 128th, 129th Para Regiment and one light artillery regiment.
- (b) 44th Airborne Division, Yingshan; 130th, 131st, 132nd Para Regiment and one light artillery regiment.
- (c) 45th Airborne Division, Huangpi; 133rd, 134th, 135th Para Regiment and one light artillery regiment.

Value of Airborne Forces

Airborne Forces are a threat in being from the very outset. Their employment or mere threat of employment to spearhead an operation has great strategic value, which demonstrates significant resolve.⁵ Above mentioned French airborne operation for capturing Timbuktu in Mali highlights the usefulness of retaining the airborne capability for quickly gaining territory in denied areas. It also made a political statement of the French resolve to both the people of Mali and the Islamist fundamentalists. In 1994, the military show of force by USSF ground operations and airborne forces en-route for an airborne assault into Port-au-Prince, Haiti, proved decisive in reinstatement of Haitian President Aristide.⁶ The operation underway was then changed from a forcible entry to permitted entry; 20,000 troops of a 15-nation force air-landed or arrived by sea ports for Operation 'Restore Democracy'.

Future operations will require the speed, mobility and discipline of airborne units, for gaining foothold and securing lodgment for link up by follow-on forces.⁷ These operations could include kinetic forced entry to humanitarian and disaster relief operations. The capabilities inherent in air delivery demonstrates the greatest strength of airborne forces – a capability to rapidly project strategic power over great distances. Airborne forces are characteristically flexible, customised and ready to be able to provide surprise effect. The employment of airborne forces requires prudent planning but can create disproportionately huge effect compared to its size or capabilities, and may be the opening move to seize the initiative, including for evacuating non-combatants or quelling civil unrest.

Tasking of Airborne Forces

Combat employment missions of airborne troops allow a commander to insert surface forces directly and quickly into battle and to sustain combat operations.⁸ For example, combat missions may involve air dropping paratroopers behind adversary lines. Combat sustainment missions may consist of reinforcement of front-line forces engaged with the adversary. Airlift affords commanders a high degree of combat manoeuvrability permitting adversary troop strongholds to be bypassed. This provides to friendly forces a potent offensive advantage, complicating the adversary's defensive preparations. The combat employment and sustainment mission usually accounts for a small percentage of total airlift sorties; nevertheless, its importance is far greater than what the number of sorties indicates. This is a capability which, in most circumstances, cannot be accomplished by other means.

Airborne Forces can be tasked for a variety of missions that could be strategic, operational, or tactical.⁹ Some examples of these are as follows:-

(a) **Strategic.** Airborne Forces are 'threat in being' and simply alerting airborne forces conveys political signal at the strategic level. Strategic missions may require airborne forces to seize an airhead from which follow-on ground or air operations can be launched. Given their strategic mobility, they can move from distant bases to strike at important targets deep in enemy-held territory with little warning.

(b) **Operational.** Airborne Forces can be tasked to seize objectives like airfields, bridges, passes or other key terrain deep in the enemy's rear areas as part of operational tasking, linked to the operational-level commander's concept, simplifying the accomplishment of his assigned tasks. These airborne operations are usually short and require a linkup by ground forces keeping in mind the ground holding capability of an airborne force. The advantage is that Airborne Forces can be employed anywhere in the theatre of war. They attack deep to achieve operational level objectives.

(c) **Tactical.** Airborne Forces assault in the rear or to the flank of the enemy, preferably where few fixed defences exist and where well-organised enemy combat units are not initially present. Airborne units both assault their objectives and move to link up with ground forces, or seize an objective and hold ground till the arrival of ground forces.

Indian Scene

India has one Parachute Brigade (reserve formation of Army Headquarters) and a total of five parachute battalions, including three parts of the parachute brigade and two new parachute battalions in over the last five years, signifying that the Army understands the value of airborne capability. During Operation 'Brass Tacks', the then Army Chief wanted to quickly re-establish the second Parachute Brigade which had been converted to an Infantry Brigade. However, he was informed that converting this Infantry Brigade back into a Parachute Brigade would require many years.

In 1995, then Army Chief, General BC Joshi ordered the creation of a Special Forces Regiment and a Special Forces Headquarters to formulate policies to equip, train and task the regiment.¹⁰ This was pursuant to a comprehensive army study ordered by Lieutenant General BC Joshi when he was Director General of Military Operations. The study recognised the need for separating the *Special Forces from the Airborne Forces; Special Forces being force multipliers and airborne forces being infantry units in airborne role meant for power projection and supporting army operations*. Accordingly, the Special Forces Regiment and the Special Forces Headquarters were formed. The then Director General of Military Operations (later Vice Chief of Army Staff), Lieutenant General Vijay Oberoi, was appointed Honorary Colonel of the Regiment to ensure adequate patronage to the fledgling regiment. Significantly, when the need to raise a fourth Special Forces battalion came up, the Parachute Regiment, which had been the traditional manpower source for Special Forces battalions, declined because now there was a separate Special Forces Regiment.

Unfortunately, General BC Joshi passed away in harness. Under pressure from the veteran paratroopers, the new Army Chief disbanded the Special Forces Regiment and the Special Forces Headquarters.¹¹ Manpower of the latter was merged into Army's Military Operations and Infantry Directorates. One reason given to disband the Special Forces Regiment was that the Special Forces battalions that time numbered three (now they are nine); but that was poor cover to deflect peer pressure because surely the fact that there were three Special Forces battalions only was taken into account while establishing the Special Forces Regiment. The new Army Chief later called the Commander of the disbanded Special Forces

Headquarters to his office and told him, “The *Gaon Boodas* (Village elders) from your Regiment had virtually blown up the roof top of my office till such time I agreed to scrap this new Special Forces Regiment”.¹² General Vijay Oberoi’s remarks on this retrograde decision were, *“In the past, the Special Forces have been stymied by successive Colonels of the Parachute Regiment for short-term gains.”*¹³ He rightfully felt that there is no place for “narrow regimental loyalties” in a professional army. Needless to mention, that the strategic, operational and tactical setback because of this disbandment was considerable to the Army.

In Indian Army, the Parachute units and Parachute (Special Forces) are housed in the same Regiment; ‘The Parachute Regiment’. Ironically, the Airborne Forces that have a distinct and important role at the operational, strategic and tactical levels began concentrating more on conversion to Special Forces. Cases were projected to Army Pay Commissions for equating the pay and allowances of both types of forces, but these were turned down by successive Army Chiefs. In 1999, the Perspective Planning Directorate, Army Headquarters had opined, *“By their very nomenclature, the Parachute (Special Forces) Battalions are unique. Therefore, there is a need to de-link and distinguish them from other similar organisations. While some of the tasks that they may perform may be similar to those of regular Infantry / Parachute Battalions, the similarity ends here. Unless this uniqueness is accepted and enforced in all aspects of organisation, equipment, training and administration of these units, they may not achieve their potential”.*¹⁴

In 2002, a presentation was made to Lieutenant General RK Nanavatty, then Northern Army Commander, for converting the Parachute Brigade to Special Forces.¹⁵ General Nanavatty’s response was, *“I find the vision blurring in certain quarters on the issue of Parachute and Parachute (Special Forces) units. I am very clear that a Parachute Battalion is simply an infantry battalion in airborne role and has nothing in common with a Special Forces Battalion.... As regards the Parachute Brigade, I view them as a rapid reaction force to be used within and outside the country”.* He added that the Parachute Brigade should have been first responders to the massive earthquake that had occurred in Gujarat. In 2009, when General Deepak Kapoor, then Army Chief visited the Parachute Brigade, the sole demand was for converting the Parachute Battalions to Special Forces. When the Chief said he needed the Parachute Brigade, response was that the Chief could raise more Parachute Units. But then the Chief responded that the moment new Parachute Units were raised, they too would start vying for converting to Special Forces.

With the proposal to establish a Special Operations Command/Division, the military Special Forces are being integrated into the new organisation. This would permit the airborne troops to retain their individual entity. It must be acknowledged that airborne operations are at a distinctively separate level, whereas, within Special Operations are the more focussed operations that are undertaken by Special Forces. It is not without reason that the US maintains its airborne divisions separate from the Special Operations Command. In fact, the airborne troops provide volunteers for SOCOM, who have to undergo rigorous selection process.

The Future

As a regional power, progressing towards becoming a global power, India would need power projection capabilities in future perhaps more than now. There is no doubt that high air defence environment threatens airborne operations but such operations need not be at the outbreak of hostilities. What about degrading enemy surveillance and air defence capabilities optimising futuristic technologies (cyber, electronic, space) together with special operations, not just aerial suppression, to create a corridor for airborne operations for specific period of time. Besides, are we looking at airborne operations only against Pakistan and China? What about Out of Area Contingencies (OOAC) and other tasks discussed above? Not many know that when Maldives

had asked for assistance, then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi tasked the National Security Guard (NSG) for it but Inspector General (Operations) of the NSG told him that NSG was not trained in parachuting and if Male airfield was held, they would have to fly back wasting hours. That is how the task was given to the Parachute Brigade. It is for similar reasons that PLA is retaining its 15th Airborne Corps, and Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka maintain airborne capability. There may also be occasions where India may have to undertake operations in concert with strategic partners, with or without formal military alliance. We must also acknowledge that such airborne capability cannot be recreated when emergencies arise. As for the Special Forces Division, it is not a game of numbers, and there are enough Special Forces in the country anyway. At a recent seminar 'Future Contours and Trends in Warfare' held at New Delhi on 06 Sep 2017, Lieutenant General DS Hooda, former Northern Army Commander highlighted the poor state of heliborne training in infantry battalions due to lack of helicopter effort. The parachute battalions can perform such tasks very well. On balance, prudence lies in retaining the parachute brigade and parachute battalions for airborne tasks.

Conclusion

The viewpoint that airborne operations are a thing of the past is gross misnomer. The mere fact that four countries maintain divisional or above level airborne forces, and 48 countries maintain these forces at brigade or smaller level is proof enough to the contrary. The single lift capability should not be inhibiting factor either; China's 15th Airborne Corps has single lift capability with military aircraft of only one brigade at a time. We must also acknowledge that such airborne capability cannot be recreated when emergencies arise. India will continue to need airborne forces in the foreseeable future. Our parachute brigade and parachute battalions must be maintained and nurtured for airborne tasks. This capability should not be mixed up with the Special Operations Command/Division that is being established.

Endnotes

¹ 'Airborne Operations', GlobalSecurity.org, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/airborne.htm>

² 'Do Pakistan Armed Forces Lack Dedicated Airborne/ Airborne/Paratrooper Division???, 'Pakistan Defence', September 12, 2017, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/do-pakistan-armed-forces-lack-dedicated-airborne-paratrooper-division.432568/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ 'Airborne Operations', GlobalSecurity.org, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/airborne.htm>

⁶ 'The Future of Airborne Forces in NATO', NATO Defense College Conference, Rome, Italy, 11-12 April, 2013, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/166780/Report_FutureAirborneForcesNATO_Lasconjarias.pdf

⁵ 'Do Pakistan Armed Forces Lack Dedicated Airborne/ Airborne/Paratrooper Division???, 'Pakistan Defence', September 12, 2017, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/do-pakistan-armed-forces-lack-dedicated-airborne-paratrooper-division.432568/>

⁷ 'The Future of Airborne Forces in NATO', NATO Defense College Conference, Rome, Italy, 11-12 April, 2013, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/166780/Report_FutureAirborneForcesNATO_Lasconjarias.pdf

⁸ 'Airborne Operations', GlobalSecurity.org, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/airborne.htm>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Saikat Datta, 'Special Forces Circus', Outlook, November 08, 2004, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/special-forces-circus/225600>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² P C Katoch and Saikat Datta, 'India's Special Forces – History and Future of Indian Special Forces, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, pp 112

¹³ Saikat Datta, 'Special Forces Circus', Outlook, November 08, 2004, <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/special-forces-circus/225600>

¹⁴ PC Katoch and Saikat Datta, 'India's Special Forces – History and Future of Indian Special Forces, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, pp 48

¹⁵ PC Katoch and Saikat Datta, 'India's Special Forces – History and Future of Indian Special Forces, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, pp 117

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