

# Special Forces – Combined Employment with Irregulars

Lieutenant General PC Katoch,  
PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd)<sup>®</sup>

## Abstract

*The sub-conventional warfare has gained prominence in the continuum of war with increased lethality of weapon systems and transparency in battlefield. Costs in conflict having become prohibitive, including in terms of lives, has led to reduction in 'boots on ground'. The alternative force has become irregular forces, which are being used increasingly in conjunction with Special Forces (SF) to promote own national interests by countries big and small. India has adverse sub-conventional asymmetry vis-à-vis China-Pakistan. India needs to graduate beyond using SF in short-distance cross-border raids. The manner in which the Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD) is being raised appears a half-hearted attempt to bridge this asymmetry. The new Indian government needs to address these issues more seriously.*

## Introduction

Use of SF in conflict is as old as warfare. But a perceptible change in warfare, in recent years, is the emergence of sub-conventional segment of conflict over even the conventional and nuclear segments within the overall ambit of hybrid wars. Conventional conflict has become prohibitively costly in terms of finances and lives. Powerful nations care little about financial costs of war, especially when promoting conflict is aimed at geopolitical supremacy, control of oil, water, minerals, and promotion of own defence and industrial export objectives, in addition to other reasons. But even in such cases, costs in terms of lives matter which politicians vying for power can justify only up to a particular level as perceived by them. Therefore, the reduction in 'boots on ground' is visible, especially in conflicts raging on foreign territories.

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<sup>®</sup>Lieutenant General PC Katoch, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the United Service Institution of India.

Employment of SF is on the rise, as they provide low cost option with high gains, leaving ambiguous signatures or none at all. Yet, SF are 'force multipliers', not the end means by themselves. This too is evident from instances where excessive use of SF, experimented as replacement of the 'force' for which they are to provide the 'multiplier' effect, have not produced the expected results. In turn, such mass has caused avoidable excess casualties to SF. Therefore, the replacement 'force' is being found amongst the host of terrorist organisations roaming the world; armed, sustained, fought, suitably relocated, reused and exploited in conflict to meet political objectives of powerful nations or group of nations and their protégés, an example of the latter being Pakistan. SF employment has been integrated into this process, with instances of them operating in synch with terrorist organisations, enhancing their game-changer effect. This by no means implies that individual SF operations including against terrorist organisations have ceased.

### **Special Forces**

In asymmetric settings, SF have limitless pro-active employment possibilities to exploit dissidence; employ asymmetric approaches from the nuclear and space spheres to psychological operations, information war, economic, technical, financial war. In counter terrorism and counter insurgency, SF can be used for intelligence, surveillance and psychological operations, rival / pseudo gang operations, infiltrating radical organisations, neutralising terrorist leaders, organisations, support groups, infrastructure, selective raids, ambushes, snatch operations and incident response operations. In out of area contingencies, they can assist airborne / conventional forces or be called upon to perform politico-military missions like assistance to third world nations, surgical strikes, recovery missions, prevent terrorist use of weapon of mass destruction, humanitarian assistance and the like.

Future conflicts will see heightened need for intelligence and deniable covert capabilities for achieving strategic aims, both of which will have a major SF component. In context of the Indian sub-continent, there is little doubt that asymmetric wars (of which terrorism and insurgencies are manifestations) will continue to dominate the conflict spectrum, albeit windows of conventional war under the nuclear backdrop will remain. Warfare is no longer confined to the battlefield. Boundaries between war and no war

are blurred by asymmetric wars that have no borders, no rules, and no regulations. Psychological warfare probably imposes the largest penalty but affords the highest payoffs. Successful psychological warfare demands integrated themes and subjects which need to be developed.

The best use of SF is at the strategic level to achieve political objectives, albeit their use in support of conventional forces at the tactical and operational levels will continue. They are ideally suited to manipulate fault lines of the adversaries, in order to shape the environment in favour of own country, as an extension of foreign policy. A fact often - understood little is that SF do not create resistance movements but advice, train and assist resistance movements already in existence. A bigger misnomer also is the dividing line between 'resistance movement', 'insurgencies' and 'terrorist organisations', which depending on what one individually perceives, and there is little difference, if at all.

### **Special and Irregular Forces Mix**

As mentioned above, the sub-conventional has emerged as the principal component of war and the replacement or part-replacement force has emerged in resistance movements-insurgencies-terrorist organisations, latter being non-state actors or state-sponsored non-state actors, depending on which euphuism is used as cover. Why SF can be easily mixed with these forces is because SF operating techniques are similar to or closer to irregular forces, rather than conventional forces. This mixed employment is not new either. US-NATO, Russia, China, Pakistan etc have all been indulging in such mixed employment for past decades. Little information of such employment is available in communist countries like China and Russia because of the 'iron curtain' and fear of being eliminated, while western media and bloggers have no such compunctions.

Russia's 'Little Green Men' were hardly operating independently in Ukraine-Crimea. China's development projects worldwide are executed by People's Liberation Army (PLA) or PLA-owned companies with fair amount of PLA cadres in civil attire, as well as required numbers of SF in specific projects. Their activities remain covert and in consonance with Chinese concept of 'Unrestricted Warfare', though China portrays its intentions as most peaceful in the world.<sup>1</sup> China and / or Pakistan could send in

their “peace” troops, which by their presence would help to ensure the desired outcome. The main weight of the warfare would, however, rest on the support of local opposition movements; manipulation of public opinion, cyber-attacks, special operations and disinformation campaigns – namely, on non-military power ingredients.<sup>2</sup> The three-step act could involve: first, internal and external political subversion to undermine credibility of local government and create unrest by supporting anti-government forces, propaganda tools and media campaigns, creating pockets of influence; second, ensure toppling the government, preferably peacefully using legal or semi-legal means, and; third, overtly intervene with kinetic means presenting fait accompli.

**United States (US).** The US has been playing the game of regime change for decades.<sup>3</sup> According to a US historian who worked in US State Department, “Since 1945, US has tried to overthrow more than 50 governments, many of them democratically elected; grossly interfered in 30 countries; bombed the civilian population of 30 countries; interfered in elections in 30 countries; used chemical and biological weapons; and attempted to assassinate foreign leaders. In many cases Britain has been a collaborator”.<sup>4</sup> An example of the mechanics of how the US effects regime change is as under:

- (a) **Phase I:** Preparation. Approval of President / Secretary of Defence in conjunction of continuing intelligence and psychological operations..
- (b) **Phase II:** Initial Contact. Pilot team comprising individuals with specialised skills, appropriate for the mission, contacts established / potential irregular element.
- (c) **Phase III:** Infiltration. Special operations forces infiltrate into the operating area overtly using civilian chartered flights or clandestinely.
- (d) **Phase IV:** Organisation. Determine and agree on plan to organise expansion of resistance operations, as also confirm mutual objectives and prior agreements.
- (e) **Phase V:** Build-up. Amount of effort required for build up will depend on resistance organisation or friendly forces could fall upon well-established and robust organisations.
- (f) **Phase VI:** Employment. Maximum growth of organisation effectiveness, synchronised with planned future operations while Phases IV and V continue.

(g) **Phase VII:** Transition. Overthrow of state or liberation of occupied territory leading to a new government.

**China.** The Chinese concept of ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ is well known but not many are conversant with China’s strategy of ‘Deep Coalitions’<sup>5</sup>, though the idea of deep coalitions is present in all but in name in Unrestricted Warfare, with its repeated references to the political role played by non-state actors ranging from credit rating agencies to narco-mafias, and its emphasis on the “civilianisation of war” thesis. China’s ‘Deep Coalition’ implies it could group one-two or more nation states, civil society organisations, a narco-mafia, private corporations, individual speculator (s) and other components; implying players at many levels in the systems. Execution is at multi-dimensional levels; all groups operating simultaneously in continuous flow – multiplying, fissioning, then fusing into others, and so on. Balance of power relations among coalition nations and ability to configure the right combination of players at every level is important. China’s SF are integrated with both, ‘Unrestricted Warfare’ and the strategy of ‘Deep Coalitions’.<sup>6</sup> China’s Maoists intervention in Nepal is typical example of exploiting such strategies.

**Pakistan.** Pakistan has been using mix of regulars and irregulars since its birth in 1947. Pakistan’s ISI is linked with some 15 regional and international terrorist organisations including ISIS, al-Qaeda, Taliban, LeT, JeM, LeJ, HM, Sipah-e-Sahiba, IM, SIMI, Muslim militant groups in India’s northeast, PFI etc. Asim Umar, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) chief of South Asia and Pakistani national, has called on Indian Muslims to undertake ‘lone wolf’ attacks. The Myanmar-based Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) too is supported by ISI and LeT.<sup>7</sup> Pakistan Army’s bible is the book ‘The Quranic Concept of War’ published in 1979, that justifies terrorism, urging jihad as collective responsibility of the Muslim ummah, and is not restricted to soldiers. Special Service Group (SSG), Pakistani army regulars and Mujahids are covertly assisting Afghan Taliban in large numbers past several years.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, a Taliban commander who turned out to be a Pakistani SSG officer was killed in Helmand Province of Afghanistan by the British Special Air Service (SAS). These are just few examples for a country which is often referred as ‘Terroristan’ in media.

## Indian Scene

Despite having large number of SF, India has ignored the basics of employment of SF. This is perhaps because India still doesn't have a national security strategy, leave aside defining a national level concept for employment of SF. Ignorance and inability to grasp the strategic environment, its setting and compulsion under which such forces are employed are evident. We have failed to acknowledge that tasks of SF have widened to include controlling fault-lines of the adversaries, shaping the environment in favour of own country, building partner capabilities and the like. SF do not create insurgencies but optimise prevailing dissent and instability in enemy territory. Employing SF strategically is a different ball game from using them as super infantry in counter insurgency within India and an odd trans-border direct action raid. Operations by SF are usually conducted at operational and strategic levels in low-profile manner that aims to achieve the advantages of speed, surprise, and violence of action against an unsuspecting target.

The irony in India is that everything is viewed through the prism of political gain and vote-bank politics. The military is kept at arm's length even on issues like strategic security policy formulation, perhaps because of strong militaries in Pakistan and Myanmar and fear of military takeover despite the Indian Military being the most disciplined. That is why India's Ministry of Defence continues with its dubious distinction of being wholly manned by generalist bureaucrats, sans military professionals, and no one with military background has ever been appointed as Defence Minister or National Security Advisor. India has yet to find the right balance between security and economy. Defence allocations by the last government over the last five years, have been the lowest since 1962, when India lost the war horribly to China.

Despite a government-appointed committee on national security recommending establishment of a Special Operations Command in year 2012, in the backdrop of India combating proxy wars for over past three decades, India has made a lame duck beginning in going in for an Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD) seven years later. Ironically, the formation of AFSOD is commencing with just one battalion worth of commandos from the Army, Navy and Air Force (Army has nine SF battalions) and the Divisional Headquarter. The Divisional Headquarter is planned to be raised not in the national capital where HQ IDS is



located, but at Agra, which itself will stymie it from day one since the Divisional Commander will need to liaise with HQ IDS on daily basis for formulating various policies relating to employment, manpower, training, equipment, plus selection, prioritising and training for missions. It is also understood that the Navy and Air Force are agreeable to contribute only officers for AFSOD for the time being, not other manpower.

As part of AFSOD, there appears no plan for an intelligence cell, 'dedicated' insertion and extraction resources (helicopters, aircraft etc), support group, logistics group, cyber cell, training cell, R&D group, interface with R&AW, NTRO, IB, with SF Training School (SFTS) and the like. We may propagate that India is raising AFSOD on the lines of United States Special Operations Command (US SOCOM) but there is little understanding that aircraft and helicopters integral to SOCOM are specially modified for special operations forces. The permanent location (Key Location Plan) of SOD is not earmarked either. Given the number of SF units Army has, more units could have gone to AFSOD. Similarly, the Navy and Air Force should have been 'ordered' to provide specified number of manpower – officers and below. Continuous employment of AFSOD in areas of our strategic interests is apparently not visualised. General Raymond Thomas, Commander SOCOM, visited India in March 2019 and offered help in establishing AFSOD, but his offer was politely deflected. Given these indications, not only would complete establishment of AFSOD take few years, the political hierarchy would need to make concerted efforts to graduate beyond employment of SF in operations such as cross-border raids.

Despite a Group of Ministers strongly recommending early establishment of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) immediately post the 1999 India-Pakistan Kargil conflict, successive Indian governments have failed to do so. Plans are afoot to make the post of Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee permanent, which is presently rotated among the Army, Navy and Air Force whenever the senior most serving Chief retires. But with the limited operational powers with HQ IDS, which provides the secretariat for the Chiefs of Staff Committee, optimisation of the AFSOD at the strategic level can hardly be expected. India needs an upper layer of special operations forces directly under the Prime Minister, who should also have a SF Cell comprising SF and R&AW operatives as

adjunct to the prime minister's office to evolve a national doctrine and strategy for employment of SF, oversee their manning, equipping, training, consolidation, operational and intelligence inputs, inter-agency synergy and strategic tasking.

## Conclusion

India has an urgent need to create credible deterrence against irregular and unconventional forces. Pro-active employment of SF on the ground of our choosing can help create such deterrence. Defensive-reactive mentality in non-traditional conflict situations can hardly meet the operational requirements. Presently, India has adverse strategic asymmetry in terms of sub-conventional warfare vis-à-vis China and Pakistan, while the collusive China-Pakistan threat is intact and expanding. Hopefully, the government will address these issues seriously.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Blinka, Jan, 'Hybrid Warfare in Asia: Potential not yet Unleashed', <http://www.amo.cz/en/hybrid-warfare-in-asia-potential-not-yet-unleashed-2/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Katoch, Prakash, 'Terrorism – the good, the bad, and the ugly', Indian Defence Review, May 27, 2017, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/terrorism-the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly/>

<sup>4</sup> United States Political Warfare Policy, January 2015, <http://orchestratingpower.org/lib/LIC/PW/2015%20draft%20PWP.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Katoch, Prakash, 'Despite slowing economy, China aims to be global leader through deep coalitions', Asia Times, January 17, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/01/opinion/despite-slowing-economy-china-aims-to-be-global-leader-through-deep-coalitions/>

<sup>6</sup> Beijing's Finger in Nepal's Maoist Revolt', Debka File, May 28, 2002, <https://www.debka.com/beijings-finger-in-nepals-maoist-revolt/>

<sup>7</sup> Myres, C, Joseph, 'The Quranic Concept of War', <http://insct.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/MyersJoseph.Quranic-Concept-of-War.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Christina Lamb, 'Taliban leader killed by SAS was Pakistan officer', The Sunday Times, October 12, 2008, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/taliban-leader-killed-by-sas-was-pakistan-officer-0wptdvwxhqq>

<sup>9</sup> Katoch, Prakash, 'Special Operations Division – lame duck beginning', Indian Defence Review, March 30, 2019, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/special-operations-division-lame-duck-beginning/>