

National Security and Special Forces

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Introduction

The comity of nations in our neighbourhood with its internal and external dynamics remains a complex, opaque and dangerous place. This is all the more surprising when opportunities for economic growth, regional integration and political cooperation are predicted because of globalisation, the spread of information and development and access to new technologies. The entire region of interest to India from Gibraltar to the Strait of Malacca is beginning to be affected by winds of change. Yet the thaw in Indo-Pak and Sino-Indian relations is counter-balanced by the support given specially by our neighbours on the East and the West to non-state actors like terrorists, organised crime, internal unrest and propaganda. Thus, it would be naïve in the extreme to cling to a pious hope that conflict in the region is a thing of the past—absence of war does not necessarily imply peace. Of this we have first hand knowledge engaged as we have been in low intensity conflicts (LIC) for decades. Even though the threat of a full-scale conventional war has reduced for the present, India's security environment particularly with non-state actors vying for centre stage will continue to remain uncertain. To be recognised as a force to be reckoned with in international affairs and to deal with the multiplicity of problems that bedevil us, India needs to shape the regional environment and respond proactively to crises arising therein. For this, India needs to give urgent attention and develop Special Forces (SF) in their entirety.

SF are tailor-made to deal with situations, both internal and external, that impinge on national security because they offer capabilities to eliminate emerging threats or deal with situations that have been allowed to develop due to inimical neighbours, political immaturity, bureaucratic insensitivity or maladroitness in the hinterlands. SF would also provide

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unprecedented options including civil affairs (CA) and psychological operations (PSYOPS) to address the challenges that threaten national integrity or regional stability in ways never thought of before.

While there are many aspects – political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, social and so on – to successfully actualise such a concept, there is no gain saying that professionally sound and well equipped SF is a sine qua non for a nation aspiring to be a regional power. Unfortunately, some myopic thinkers consider a SF soldier merely as a commando who leaps out of aircraft on special occasions! This is manifestly incorrect for although a SF operative is always a high-risk taker, he can deliver results out of all proportions in a variety of ways. While conventional forces remain important, they simply do not have the range of capabilities of SF, which include land, air and maritime forces that can be employed either as joint or single service units.

An early example of what would be termed as direct action (DA) and PSYOPS task today is provided by the exploits of the legendary Major (later Major General) Otto Skorzeny of Germany who with a handful of men captured Norway and Sweden literally without firing a shot. Later, Skorzeny, in an imaginative and bold raid rescued Mussolini from the Gran Sasso Mountains in Italy where he had been imprisoned. The two operations had immense political repercussions. While all developed nations of the world have SF of some kind, it is the USA and Russia who have honed the concept of using SF in national interest into a fine art and utilise their SF extensively in war as well as in peace.

The Special Purpose Forces (SPF) of Russia known as Spetsnaz have played a major role in furthering Russia's national objectives and security concerns in Angola, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Cuba and Vietnam. Spetsgruppe 'A' and 'B' were used with good effect in the Caucasus disturbances and against the Lebanese extremists. Spetsgruppe 'Vega' was possibly responsible for the liquidation of Chechen terrorist Yandarbiev in Qatar on 11 March 2004. The importance, which the USA gives to the employment of Special Operations Forces (SOF), can be gauged from the fact that in 1999 alone the USA, by their own admission, conducted engagement operations (including CA and PSYOPS) of SOF in

over one hundred countries including El Salvador, Somalia, Vietnam, Honduras, Afghanistan and Iraq. Obviously Clausewitz's dictum that war is a continuation of state policy by other means is followed far more easily by the speed, surprise, stealth and secrecy of SF. When crisis response scenarios developed, SF of these nations were already on the ground in many situations. By their presence SF were shaping the environment, providing regionally and culturally trained forces to achieve the desired goal.

Russia and the USA have long understood that terrorist activities, LIC and sub-conventional operations are often the germinating seeds of a bigger malaise. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that the USA and Russia have taken full cognisance of RMA with its attendant effect on sensors, communication, high technology weapons, electronic warfare, networked communications and information warfare. The two countries have redoubtable, well-organised and effective SF capable of performing extremely difficult, complex and politically sensitive missions at short notice. The SF of these two nations are the product of an evolutionary process. The lessons learnt say from Grenada, Iran or Chechnya have been cogitated upon to produce unique forces with distinctive characteristics, capabilities and some limitations. The SF of these two nations are characterised by mature professional leadership, specialised skills, equipment and tactics. The personnel have language skills, political and cultural sensitivity. These flexible force structure units often have a regional focus. SEAL units of America, for example, are routinely deployed in Europe, South America, Africa and the Caribbean islands. Spetsnaz units are similarly oriented and located in specific regions. Most importantly the SF of these two nations have also a full understanding of the political context of their mission. SF developed and trained as above enables them to work with civilian populations as also with other friendly forces and contribute towards national objectives.

Capabilities of SF

Mainly because of the characteristics outlined above, SF can be formed into small versatile self-contained units that can originate into action on their own. SF can move at extremely short notice, organise quickly and deploy rapidly to provide adequate response to many situations. SF can infiltrate and operate in hostile areas.

Spetsnaz of Russia and Green Berets of the USA operated with success in Afghanistan well before conventional forces arrived on the scene. Though SF are capable of providing only limited security and medical support for themselves and those they support, SF are trained to endure and operate in austere, harsh environment. The selection process in Russia as well as in the USA is very stringent and attrition rate amongst the neophytes is 70 to 80 per cent. This ensures that only mature, tough, dependable and self-reliant individuals serve in the SF. These high-grade individuals can survey and assess local situations and take action in keeping with changing scenarios. Multilingual ability enables SF personnel to work closely with host nation's military and civilian authorities and population. The Green Berets operating and guiding the Northern Alliance in *Operation Enduring Freedom* in Afghanistan is a case in point. In CA and PSYOPS, SF can organise indigenous people into working teams to help solve local problems or create the desired atmosphere to achieve their goal. It is obvious that SF can also be employed in DA role independently or as part of an operation with conventional forces. The US employed their SF extensively in this manner to assist conventional forces in the Iraq war as well.

Concept

SF provide the nation with a sophisticated, professional force having a high percentage of assured success rate. More significant is the fact that they can be used in a graduated response that range from foreign internal defence (FID), CA, PSYOPS to DA tasks – in stand alone operations or in conjunction with conventional forces. Since the world of SF is shadowy, the canvas for strategic policy makers is quite wide. Perhaps India's response to the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka or LIC in J and K would have been different had SF been created and this strategic concept taken cognisance of at that point in time. Should a nation in our neighbourhood get embroiled in a deep morass bordering on a national crisis and seek help, SF can work closely with the host nation's government, military forces and the locals to assist them in resolving their own problems. SF can make major contributions in solving regional, ethnic, social and cultural conflicts by employing their various components singly or in tandem. By the very nature of their training, SF invariably forge strong links with civilian and military

infrastructures in their area of operation. This can be of great value for future use if they have to work with the same organisations.

In war, SF work as force multipliers. While SF can be employed in unconventional warfare (UW), and the Green Berets of the USA are generally used as such, SF is equally at home in regular military operations. SF can help conventional force commanders to seize the initiative, reduce risk, facilitate manoeuvre and achieve decisive results by attacking operational and strategic targets. By carrying out CA, SF can reduce the number of civilians in proximity of the battlefield and SF can carry out PSYOPS to deceive and demoralise the enemy. SF can operate behind enemy lines and carry out attacks on C⁴I² systems. In fact, Russia's Spetsnaz are inheritors of the razvedchik (scout) tradition who operated deep behind the enemy lines. SF can be employed with advantage in attacking submarine bases, weapon stockpiles, aircraft bases and missile launch sites. The expertise of SF in clandestine operations, raids, hostage rescue and lightning strikes is unmatched.

Against a growing security challenge, SF also offer a wide variety to combat terrorism. One area of focus includes defensive antiterrorism measures such as training and advising of security techniques, and procedures and systems that reduce vulnerability. Equally important are offensive counter terrorism measures to prevent, deter and respond to terrorist acts whenever they occur.

The Indian Scene

To avoid repetition of our failure to prevent IC-814 hijack, counter the terrorist attack on the Parliament, and other sites, it is essential that the task is entrusted to professionals. SF provide national leaders with options that fall somewhere between politics, diplomatic efforts and the use of high profile conventional forces. The use of SF in different modes gives national leadership options that limit the risk of escalation which otherwise might accompany the commitment of large conventional forces as had happened in Sri Lanka and in Jammu and Kashmir. Counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is a high priority task in our region in view of unpredictable nations like North Korea and Pakistan. Special cells of SF can be organised to monitor the

WMD trail with government agencies and international organisations in deterring proliferation of WMD and reacting appropriately, should the situation so demand.

In peacetime, SF can assist a nation in creating conditions for stable development – something that is missing, for example in our Northeastern region for decades. Such an action would also reduce the risk of or preclude armed conflict. SF can help train Assam Rifles, BSF and CRPF to improve existing security systems. By an integrated use of CA and PSYOPS programmes, SF can help strengthen government infrastructures in remote regions. Small teams can help prevent local problems from blowing out of proportion threatening internal or international stability. India's record in handling internal problems with regard to organisations like Naxalites, Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) and People's War Group (PWG) etc. is dismal. Most Chief Ministers of states regard people's unrest merely as a law and order problem and try to wish it away without hurting their vote bank. Recently, in Andhra Pradesh the government granted amnesty to the naxalites and sought to persuade them to give up the path of violence. An approach that was quickly changed to an all out offensive after the naxalites assassinated a politician. The Orissa government is planning to raise an all-tribal battalion to take on ultras like People's War Group (PWG) and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). Two reasons advanced are that it would give employment to the tribals of the region and that deployment of police forces for duty in rebel affected areas causes serious logistic problems for the state. Populist measures like these only help in creating an illusion of action, all the while allowing the problem to assume menacing proportions.

From the foregoing it would be evident that the concept for SF in India needs to be thought out in its entirety including its command and control set up before creating organisations. A knee jerk reaction and conversion of existing parachute battalions into SF addresses only a part of the problem. It would be far better to take a holistic view, decide upon the form of employment, recruit a select group including women and then train and equip them. Again, the range of operations that our SF would be required to cover needs to be decided upon. It may perhaps suggest that some units and establishments of the SF would be under different ministries like Home, Foreign and Defence. This is perfectly normal;

after all, national security is not the exclusive preserve of one particular department and turf battles must be eliminated ruthlessly. What we need is to think and evolve an organisation responsive to the national needs. *En passant*, it should be noted that in Russia, units of Spetsnaz are under different ministries like FIS, FSS and GRU. While the basic framework would of necessity be military (including Air Force and the Navy), men and women from other walks of life would be required specially in CA, PSYOPS and FID, counter-drug and IS operations

Whilst SF are a potent force and give outstanding results, SF are not a panacea for all national security ills. Though SF provide many other options to a force commander they are not a substitute for conventional forces and should not be used in run of the mill tasks. SF personnel require careful selection and extensive training and they cannot be replaced quickly. Squandering SF resources on inappropriate missions or VIP duties as had happened at one time in Russia would deplete the SF inventory rapidly. SF have an important role to play in resolving problems like IS in conjunction with civil agencies yet they are not the solution for peacetime operations. An integrated interagency approach is vital to resolve IS situations and SF should never be saddled alone with the problem. It is important to reiterate that the logistic support system for SF is quite austere and they cannot maintain themselves without significant support from conventional support structure.

Conclusion

Unlike the dramatic rescue of hostages by Spetsnaz in Moscow theatre and Beslan and the raid in Somalia by US SEALs, operations by SF are frequently clandestine. SF are generally very much behind-the-scene-warriors and often their contribution is not made public. Their principal missions range from direct action to counter-proliferation of WMD. SF also make significant contributions in various collateral activities whether counter-drug trafficking, security assistance, humanitarian assistance, search and rescue or any other special activity that affect national policy and objectives.

For India to create SF that are effective in our area of interest, it is vital that not only are the three Services included in its fold but

competent youth is taken from other professions as well. Creation of SF must begin with a vision document outlining its role. Here the national leadership must be bold, embracing various nuances of special operations discussed above. Creation of a central authority inclusive of the three Services is a basic fundamental as is the feeding in process for real time intelligence from all national agencies. At the apex level there would be a need to have a group of specialists, advisors and professionals who can be called upon to help in optimizing the use of SF as outlined in the vision document. Policy guidelines will need to be issued so that SF is used for worthwhile tasks only and not frittered away in looking after petty potentates.

Increased interdependence brought about by globalization requires a rethink as regards our national strategy. To influence security at home, India should take a lead and involve itself in a leading role abroad. Capable, competent and ubiquitous SF would do just that and help address many of our security concerns.

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