

Special Operations Command – An Imperative for India

Lieutenant General PC Katoch, PVSM,
UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd)[®]

Introduction

The Naresh Chandra Committee on national security had submitted its report in May 2012. Recommendations of the committee included creation of three new tri-service commands: Special Operations Command, Aerospace Command and Cyber Command.¹ The Committee was instituted in 2011 realising no worthwhile reforms had been undertaken during the past 10 years. The requirement for a Special Operations Command should have come up years ago since India has been subjected to proxy wars for past three decades. Ironically, the Naresh Chandra Committee ignored the recommendations of the K Subramanian headed Kargil Review Committee and the follow up Group of Minister's report to appoint a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), instead recommending a permanent Chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC). A member of the committee later disclosed that MoD did not want CDS because they thought that the Defence Secretary and his IAS colleagues would be "somehow diminished".² But this has been the irony of India – a MoD sans any military expertise and Defence Secretary, not Defence Minister, officially charged with defence of India. But the question here is will India have the political will to go for a Special Operations Command and what shape will it take?

Changed Conflict Environment

Conflicts have become hybrid with the sub-conventional occupying major battle-space. As far back as 2001, speaking at the Regional Conference on Security held in Bangladesh both Pakistani speakers Shirin Mazari, Director General, Institute of Strategic Studies and Lieutenant General Javed Hassan, Commandant,

[®]Lieutenant General PC Katoch, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd) is a veteran Special Forces officer, a leading defence analyst, a visiting fellow in foreign think tanks who contributes regularly for Indian and foreign publications. He is also an elected member of the USI Council.

National Defence College openly advocated low intensity conflict, guerilla warfare, indirect intervention, psychological warfare, terrorism and subversion as a manner of tactics short of direct all-out military confrontation.³ Over the years, because of the enormous costs of conventional wars both in terms of lives and finances, even big powers have switched to using irregular forces; typically changing from 'boots on ground' to 'boots on ground by proxy'. That is why irregular forces have emerged with greater strategic value over conventional forces be it Middle East, West Asia, Ukraine or South Asia. Consequently, even the US and NATO have been battling irregular forces.

China-Pakistan Sub-conventional Construct

In the early 1960s, China advised Pakistan to create a militia to fight prolonged war in India's backyard.⁴ These are the *jihadis* of today. By 1992-93, armed modules of Pakistani *jihadis* were identified in ten Indian states besides J&K.⁵ They were also undertaking joint training in terrorist camps inside Bangladesh. The list of Pakistan sponsored terrorist attacks, big and small, in India is long : attack on Parliament, 26/11, Tanda, Kaluchak, Akshardham, Samba, Dinanagar, Gurdaspur, Pathankot, Pampore and more. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar has said that the attack on IAF base, Pathankot was by non-state actors who operate with Pakistani support.⁶ Considering that Pakistan's ISI is hand in glove with some 14 terrorist organisations, they are actually all state-supported, not non-state actors. Pakistan's state policy of terrorism is unlikely to change because of continued backing by the US and China. Pakistan's military holds all cards including foreign and defence policies; why should it let go of the power and money when as far back as 2007 its private business-corporate-industrial complex was pegged at US\$ 20.7 billion?⁷ In November 2014, Sartaj Aziz, Nawaz Sharif's Foreign Affairs Advisor and NSA publicly stated, "militants not dangerous to Pakistan should not be targeted".⁸ So, organisations like LeT, JuD, JeM are nurtured by Pakistan.

China provides tacit support to Pakistan's anti-India *jihad* and has been arming and supporting insurgencies within India.⁹ China supports Indian Maoists and has provided ULFA training and arms, in addition to sanctuary on Chinese soil. Arms and communication equipment are being pumped into India, particularly to Maoists and the PLA of Manipur.¹⁰ Chinese intelligence was behind the NSCN

(K) abrogating its 13 year old ceasefire with India.¹¹ Last year in May, Chinese intelligence orchestrated establishment of the United Liberation Front of West, South, East Asia (ULFWSEA) in Myanmar, combining nine major militant groups of northeast including the NSCN (K) and ULFA.¹² With this, China has the handle to create instability in our northeast while claiming entire Arunachal Pradesh. The China-Pakistan collusive terrorist threat is also manifesting through Maldives getting rapidly radicalised by Pakistani proxies. Chinese support to Pakistan is becoming stronger with her strategic lodgment in Gilgit-Baltistan, China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar as a future Chinese naval base.

The US Factor

Michael Hayden, former CIA Director in his recent book 'Playing to the Edge' has expressed deep frustration of the "duplicity" of the Pakistani leadership when it came to taking action against terrorist groups; not taking action against terrorist groups, particularly against al-Qaida, Taliban, LeT and the Haqqani network.¹³ He also writes about Shuja Pasha, former ISI Chief admitting to ISI's role in the 26/11 terror attacks. Now Musharraf admits Pakistani military training and supporting terrorist organisations. David Headley too reveals Pakistani complicity in terror attack. On 09 Feb 2016, James Clapper, Director of US National Intelligence presenting the 'Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Committee' to the US Senate Armed Services Committee had just four lines to say about Pakistan, that too hyphenating her with India, "Relations between Pakistan and India remain tense following a terrorist attack on Pathankot Air Force base in India, which New Delhi blames on a Pakistani-based group, and further dialogue hinges on Pakistan's willingness to take action against those in Pakistan linked to the attack."¹⁴ India would have shared with the US strong evidence of JeM's terror activities and role in the Pathankot attack is obvious but there is no US pressure on Pakistan to bring the perpetrators of even the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks including Hafiz Saeed to book.

Ashley Tellis of Carnegie Endowment had said, "India being continuously subjected to terror actually suits many (read US included) ... India is a sponge that absorbs global terror."¹⁵ More significantly, the Washington Times of 06 Jan, in an editorial titled 'Islamic terrorists open a new front', referring to the terrorist attack

on Pathankot Air base said *“Just what the civilised world needs, a new front in the war against radical Islamic terrorism.”*¹⁶ That is why the US has given a free hand to Pakistan in Afghanistan – farce of talks with Afghanistan notwithstanding. That is why the fresh sale of F-16s to Pakistan under pretext of fighting terrorism knowing fully well that these would be used against hapless Baluchis or against India and Afghanistan.¹⁷ That is why John Kerry’s lame excuse that these F-16s are because the US did not want to upset the balance?¹⁸ The bottom-line is that the US support to India against Pakistani terrorism would remain perfunctory.

India’s Strategic Culture

Despite being continuously subjected to terrorism and proxy wars by both China and Pakistan, India seems content with its archaic policy of using conventional force and dialogue to contend with belligerent neighbours. The advanced sub-conventional capabilities of China and Pakistan *versus* the absence of the same in India should be of serious concern to us, considering the strategic asymmetry this has created. Sub-conventional war is and will continue to be the order of the day, a fact that India has failed to acknowledge. As a result, we continue to bleed through Pakistan’s policy of ‘thousand cuts’.

Lack of strategic culture has been the bane of India albeit bright moments like the liberation of Bangladesh. Former Foreign Secretary, Kanwal Sibal wrote in March 2013, “What would explain our unwillingness to recognise the depth of these threats even today and take appropriate action Pakistan uses the instrument of terrorism against us but we think that we can bring this to an end through dialogue. We let Kashmiri separatists meet Pakistani leaders in Delhi and Islamabad That we produced Chanakya almost 2400 years ago is not sufficient ground to claim that today’s India possesses a strategic culture.”¹⁹ We appear to have failed to see the consequences of increased Pakistani strategic depth in Afghanistan, as Robert Kaplan warned saying, “An Afghanistan that falls to Taliban sway threatens to create a succession of radicalised Islamic societies from the Indian-Pakistan border to Central Asia. This would, in effect, a greater Pakistan, giving Pakistan’s ISI the ability to create a clandestine empire able to confront India in the manner that Hezbollah and Hamas confront Israel”.²⁰

India's Dilemma

India's dilemma revolves around an incoherent Pakistan policy, faced with Pakistan's sweet talk and stabbings, laced with American cajoling. As far back as 2011, Pakistani scholar Amir Mir wrote about resurgence of the JeM and Pakistani establishment remaining deeply embroiled with its jihadi proxies, treating them as the civilian face of Pakistan army.²¹ A recent article in New York Times too talks of the Pakistan army reviving JeM. So while India talks of the complicity of JeM, in particular its chief Azhar Masood in the Pathankot attack, Pakistan has gone ahead and filed an FIR against "unknown persons". Obviously no one in the military supported JeM will be brought to book – same as the perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack – ISI and LeT.

In the absence of institutionalised strategic thinking, our response is to raise more and more police forces barricading ourselves like the proverbial ostrich, even as the China-Pakistan threat is expanding including at the sub-conventional level. There does appear to be some understanding that China-Pak would endeavour to win the end game against us without full-fledged conventional war; aside from limited conflict, war in the cyber and electro-magnetic domains and heightened asymmetric war, increasing their grip on our fault lines. But we appear to be at a loss how to deal with the situation aside from diplomacy and conventional power despite the fact that 'Operation Parakaram' in the wake of attack on our Parliament having proved that such response was inadequate.

Without effective deterrence against irregular forces, we have not been able to dispel the 'soft state' label. Idealism should not be a stand-alone factor because the costs of always following an inward looking policy are that much higher.²² Therefore, the most effective foreign policy for any country, whatever its weight, is one that balances realism and idealism, which in effect makes idealism realistic. Our inward looking policy has also resulted in continuing voids of strategic intelligence since Independence, adversely affecting our national security. Only technical intelligence is not enough.

To bridge the strategic sub-conventional asymmetry vis-à-vis China-Pakistan, required deterrence can be affected by taking the irregular conflict to enemy soil. Such advice on how to deal

with geopolitical bullies has been offered in the past, but ignored lacking political will.²³ But now is the opportune time with defence allocations being lowest since 1962, the Government needs to adopt such low cost option through special operations and a Special Operations Command.

Special Operations

Special operations are operations that are “special” or unconventional and carried out by dedicated Special Forces units using unconventional methods and resources.²⁴ These may be performed independently of or in conjunction with conventional military operations, the primary being a political or military objective where a conventional force requirement does not exist or might adversely affect the overall strategic outcome. Such operations are usually conducted at operational and strategic levels in a low-profile manner that aims to achieve the advantages of speed, surprise, and violence of action against an unsuspecting target. Our special operations experiments with organisations like LTTE and EROS were dismal failures because our external intelligence agencies think that such operations are their exclusive domain whereas special operations must have adequate mix of Special Forces and external intelligence.

Special Operations Command (SOC)

Special Forces are meant to be employed at strategic and operational levels, *not internally*. Their strategic level employment is on politico-military missions under the highest political authority, of which the military may or may not be informed. Operational level employment of Special Forces is in support of military plans. In our case, the military at best would be interested to undertake special operations to the depth of Strike Corps operations. We have no Special Forces potential in asymmetric conflict to further national security objectives. Special Forces should actually be central to our asymmetric response, which does not imply operating in large numbers always since such response do not automatically imply a physical attack. The key lies in achieving strategic objectives through application of modest resources with the essential psychological component. According to Stephen Cohen, “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.”²⁵

Putting all our Special Forces under a SOC akin to the US SOCOM cannot work as threats and higher defence set up of both countries differ largely. Besides, we may land up with a permanent Chairman of COSC without operational powers instead of a CDS with full powers. Creating a Special Operations Command under the former would imply creating a mammoth organisation with limited difference from the present day output, especially when HQ IDS is not even integrated with the MoD, and the military are interested in employment of Special Forces at the operational level, not strategic.

The organisation of SOC should be based on about two-three battalion worth under the Prime Minister, with the nucleus taken from existing Special Forces. The word 'Command' should not create an impression akin to a mammoth Army Command. Strategic employment of Special Forces is not a game of numbers. Special Forces Teams (SFTs) of SOC individually could comprise 25-50 or more depending on the country/region and its relative importance in terms of national security objectives.²⁶ The PM would need a Special Forces Cell in the PMO comprising serving and veteran Special Forces and R&AW officers tasked with: evolving a national doctrine and strategy for employment of Special Forces, oversee their manning, equipping, training, consolidation, operational and intelligence inputs, inter-agency synergy, strategic tasking and monitoring of all missions.²⁷

The SFTs should have institutionalised access to integrated intelligence, varied insertion and extraction capability and adequate support elements. It is important to remember that special operations are typically carried out with limited numbers of highly trained personnel that are adaptable, self-reliant and able to operate in all environments, and able to use unconventional combat skills and equipment. The special operations are usually implemented through specific, tailored intelligence. Strategic level tasking of SFTs should include missions like: information support operations; surveillance and target designation in areas of strategic interest; shaping asymmetric and conventional battlefield to Indian advantage; deter opponents exploiting our fault lines; exploit fault lines of adversaries; undertake information/psychological operations and unconventional warfare; anti hijack; build partner capabilities with friendly countries; and above all, provide the cutting edge resource for strategic force projection.

Balance of our Special Forces should be reorganised into an Integrated Commando Command (ICC) directly under the CDS, integrating the Army Special Forces, MARCOS, Garuds, SAGs of NSG and SGs of SFF.²⁸ The Commander of ICC must have commanded SF. For internal security requirements, the police force must raise their own specialists. Significantly, the CCS note on which the NSG was raised had required the Army to provide manpower on deputation “only” for 10 years, which has not been implemented. It is time that the police take on their own responsibilities for internal security more seriously.

Conclusion

While the sub-conventional forces are taking centre stage and asymmetric threats mount against us, high level of sophisticated coordination and synergy necessary between various political, military, intelligence agencies and other departments to pull off special operations at strategic level are missing. Establishment of a Special Operations Command is an imperative, enabling credible deterrence to proxy wars being waged on us.

Endnotes

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