

Does India Need a Rapid Deployment Force?

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India's experience in Sri Lanka and recently in Maldives proves the need for an integrated Force of the three services, Army, Navy and Air Force to be trained for short-notice quick deployment in the Region. President Reagan's intervention in the GRENADA Island (East Caribbean), when the writer was in that area, did not surprise us in the light of dithering stance taken by Britain, who had an implied responsibility towards their erstwhile colonies of the West Indies. The continuing bloodshed and political murders were brought to a halt and the fear of Communism spreading in the Caribbean was stalled. Although the world criticised his action, those of us in the Region, felt that his move was justifiable, launched in time and proved effective.

Already India has been called upon to play a protective role in South Asia: from Bangladesh to Sri Lanka and recently Maldives. In Sri Lanka, whether we have gained or lost, we have certainly demonstrated India's willingness to assist the neighbours in an emergency, although in this case the cost to the Nation has proved to be heavy, both in material and manpower. Only time will tell whether we acted wisely in pushing in one go a major defence component, untrained and unprepared for such a venture.

Some of us live to see the faulty decisions by Soldiers and Statesmen: In 1950 General Maharaj Rajindrasinhji, the Army Commander of Southern Command, was directed by Army Headquarters to evaluate the strategic importance of the chain of islands, the Laccadives and Maldives, stretched along the West coast of India. The Army Commander nominated me (I was then CSO Southern Command) as the Leader of an inter-service Team comprising a Wing Commander of the Air Force and a Lt Commander of the Navy, with a Frigate under the latter's command to be also our means of transportation, and, in addition, a war-seasoned British Lt Colonel was appointed my Advisor and Chief Staff Officer. After a two week's spree round the islands, we submitted our recommendations to Army Headquarters, fully supported by the Army Commander: (I am writing from memory):

- a) An air landing strip may be constructed at each of the group of islands, Laccadives and Maldives

(b) from these islands high-powered communication links should be established with New Delhi; and,

(c) a small garrison comprising an infantry company group, with essential support elements from the air force and the navy, may be stationed at the capital of each group; the garrison should have a strong component of INTELLIGENCE personnel to function as “the eyes and ears” of India. These garrisons may come under the command of Western Commands of Army, Navy and Air Force, under the cooperation of the Army Commander.

The suggestion in this paper goes beyond that recommendation in that a Mobile Inter-Service Force may be formed in addition. Whilst the composition of such a force is in the domain of Chiefs of Staff, the writer wishes to express some ideas which may be given consideration:

(a) The TV Doordarshan documentary on Maldivian operation “CACTUS” gave an event by event account of the “invasion” by an inter-service cooperative effort leading to the capture of MV Progress Light, the hi-jacked Maldivian ship and its adventurous group of mercenaries. Whilst the success of the operation redounds to the credit of Services, a detailed examination would reveal that a “sledgehammer was used to drive a nail”. Why? For two simple reasons: (i) for lack of intelligence, the Planners were obliged to commit a large Force out of proportion to the need, and, (ii) even after past experiences, we had not given thought to having a “small, mobile, hard-hitting Task Force, which was trained as such and located at a suitable place in India to be launched at the behest of the Chiefs of Staff.

(b) History has shown that time and again lessons are seldom drawn from the past. Take the Central Intelligence system of the Government; we discovered its weakness in the 1962 Army debacle, when I directed the DRDO Soldier-Scientists Team on the instructions of the then Chief of Army Staff, General J.N. Chaudhuri, to carry out an assessment of the reasons for the debacle. Among the various shortcomings we had highlighted were: (i) the need for an integrated central intelligence system, and, (ii) the need to train troops for sudden operations in new *unfamiliar* environments. The same shortcoming appeared to have become evident in the Forces assigned to Sri Lanka; we lacked intelligence before launch and even afterwards, the field intelligence did not prove to be effective either. The British from whom we inherited

the pattern of intelligence organisation, miserably failed in the Falkland Islands due to a disastrous lack of information of the happenings, which led to their occupation by Argentina. One fact brought home to us is that we have to think afresh for ourselves so that in planning a mobile force, feeding intelligence before and after the operation is launched, is an essential factor for the initial success and for the follow up momentum to be maintained.

Invited to Egypt at the request of President Nasser to Prime Minister Nehru, I asked for a briefing (as I was cleared for confidential information to discuss a defence project as CC R&D) on the UNIFIED Intelligence System of the Egyptian Government. Housed in one multi-storey building were all the intelligence services of the Government: Army, Navy and Air Force, and the civil services, both external and internal intelligence, under the command of a Major General, who reported regularly to the President. Strategically placed, and after the 1958 War, Egypt had realised the need for ONE AGENCY to coordinate all intelligence work. On my return to Delhi, I wrote a separate chapter about this in my Report to the Government. The gnawing reality is that the gaps showed up in our intelligence system in the assassination of the very popular and able Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. I believe we have made a few changes. Has the subject been examined in depth? Why do we still continue to separate civil intelligence from military intelligence? Why do we still believe in Committees to coordinate the work of the agencies concerned? There are, of course, plausible answers to these questions.

After the Grenada operation, President Reagan conceived the idea of a "Mobile Rapid Deployment Force". As emphasised by the President at that time such a Force would function as ONE UNIT. Inevitably there would be ONE Commander of the Force, who would take his orders from the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee.

Whether it is Maldives today, Laccadives tomorrow or Andamans the day after, it is from such strategic points that we have to guard our 6000 km coast line. Thus in addition to the Garrisons, which would have among the most sophisticated gadgetry for gathering intelligence, a Rapid Deployment Mobile Force may be formed and suitably placed, to be launched at short notice. Among the essential requirements is the need to TRAIN as an integrated Force.

Apropos the deployment of small forces, I would like to quote from the

SIGNAL Journal* of the USA, wherein Admiral Boyes has done some crystal-gazing into the future structure of the armed services:

“... the large conventional forces would be replaced by fluid offensive and defensive strike Teams.... Brigades will, in most cases, replace divisions as major maneuver groups although divisions will remain as resource centres. These attack or defence units will be rapidly deployable and will ride to fight on high speed, low flying transport aircraft and helicopters....

“Tactical air units will be reduced significantly in numbers and will be increasingly robotlike, being controlled from ground centres. Large navies gradually will decline to be replaced by 60 mile per hour surface ships and deep diving submarines, all equipped with missiles. Weapons will be longer ranged, self-guiding and seeking and more lethal... use of lasers and X-rays will come into use along with radio millimeter wavelength weapons.....

“By the year 2013, there will be FOUR major powers: China, INDIA, the United States and the Soviet Union..... The Asia-Pacific economy and markets will be the most important on this globe.....”.

Whereas the above gives a good look into the future by a military writer of fame in the USA, it is not out of place to our local theme for a rapid deployment force. With an alert Government and an alert Parliament, the latter having members who have been eminent military commanders, right answers for such contingencies could be found, which have so far been tackled on an *ad hoc* basis.

NOTE

* Jon L. Boyes, Vice Adm, USN (Retd),

“The Future Influence of C³ Technologies” in *Signal-Journal of the Armed Forces Communication and Electronic Association of USA*, June 1988.