

Strategic Analysis Paper

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The Indian Special Forces: An Evolving Approach

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Key Points

- As an emerging power in the Indo-Pacific region, India may be called upon to use its forces to achieve political objectives. Those forces would, however, be deployed in specific circumstances and, in the years to come, under a joint command under the aegis of the Integrated Defence Staff.
- India's Special Forces could be used for both external and internal counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.
- The Naresh Chandra task force of Indian National Security stressed the need to have a Joint Special Operations Command (J-SOC).
- If it becomes operational, the J-SOC will be under the Integrated Defence Services headquarters and will include the existing special forces of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Summary

As an emerging power in the Indo-Pacific region, India is looking to expand its strategic priorities. Accordingly, there is a growing understanding among India's wider strategic community – including the armed forces – that situations requiring Indian intervention will emerge, especially in the troubled atolls of the South Asian sub-region.

In such situations, where the armed forces might be deployed beyond India's borders, the preference will be to use elite forces capable of operating under a single command.

Analysis

In 2012, the 14-member Naresh Chandra task force of Indian National Security identified the need for a Special Operations Command (SOC), to bring together the existing special forces of the Indian Army, Navy, Air Force and other relevant agencies under a unified command and control structure to execute strategic or politico-military operations in tune with India's national security objectives.¹

Although the task force's report is classified, commentators indicate that one of the key recommendations is the need to strengthen the clandestine and "unconventional" warfare capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces to effectively tackle the challenges of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations both in and outside Indian territory.

The concept of expeditionary forces is not new to the Indian Armed Forces. After all, the British Indian Armed Forces were one of the five forces across the world that had the capacity to project power after the Second World War.

Both the British Indian Army and the American soldiers who were stationed in India during the Second World War were well-versed in the concept of expeditionary warfare. The logistics for launching such operations from Indian soil were in evidence throughout much of the war.

But, with India's independence, came the new, professional, concept of firm civilian control of the military. This was coupled with the elimination of the political power of the Armed Forces. Added to those changes, military personnel holding the ranks of colonel and brigadier were promoted to the rank of general in a single day, along with the abolition of the post of Commander-in-Chief which resulted in the inability to understand the importance of having either a separate Special Forces Command or integrating such a command within the existing structure of the Indian Armed Forces.

Despite that, the concept of Special Operations Forces (SOF) was applied by the Indian Army while it contributed to peacekeeping operations as part of its commitment to the United Nations and during Operation *Cactus* carried out in the Maldives in 1988.

Present composition of the Indian Special Forces

Special Forces of the Indian Army

The Indian Army's Special Forces presently comprise three battalions of the Parachute Brigade that have been fully converted to Para-Commando units to optimise their utility for special operations; a fourth is being considered for similar conversion.²

¹ 'Naresh Chandra Task Force on National Security', *The Calibre*, 25 July 2012. <<http://thecalibre.in/in-depth-current-affairs/naresh-chandra-task-force-on-national-security/072012/?p=482/>>.

² 'Countering Terrorism and the Role of Military Special Operations: An Indian View', Atlantic Council, 11 September 2012. <<http://www.acus.org/event/countering-terrorism-and-role-military-special-operations-indian-view>>.

The Indian Army also has an amphibious brigade stationed in Port Blair under Fortress Commander, Andaman and Nicobar – the only integrated command in the Indian military. These units constitute the sum total of what may be called a special operations capability.

Indian Navy Special Forces

The MARCOS (Marine Commandos – previously known as Marine Commando Force, or MCF) is an élite special operations unit of the Indian Navy. The force has acquired experience and a reputation for professionalism over the two decades that it has been in existence. Some MARCOS personnel are also attached to Army Special Forces units conducting counter-terrorism operations.

To strengthen its capabilities for special operations, the Navy is planning to procure an advanced Integrated Combat System (ICS) for the MARCOS. The ICS will provide effective command, control and information sharing, to maximise the capabilities of MARCOS individuals and groups during operations.

The ICS will provide enhanced capabilities, such as tactical awareness and an improved ability to fight in hostile environments. It can also enable Group Commanders to remotely monitor and control operations. It will aid in integrating an individual sailor's capabilities for day and night surveillance, ballistic protection, communication and firepower, through an integrated network at the individual and group levels. Since initiating the procurement process through a Request for Information (RFI), the Navy's Directorate of Special Operations and Diving has sought information about ICS equipment from vendors around the world.

For individuals, the equipment required by the Navy includes lightweight helmets, head-mounted displays, tactical and soft ballistic vests, and communications equipment. At the group-level, requirements include command, control and surveillance systems, along with high-speed communications equipment. The devices will require sights for the sniper rifles, laser range finders and thermal imagers (medium- and long-range) and near IR laser pointers, to enable a combat group to undertake surveillance, reconnaissance and targeting. The ICS must be compatible with assault rifles and close-quarter combat weapons. The Navy has recently started inducting the Israeli IMI *Tavor* TAR-21 for use by the MARCOS unit.

Special Air Forces (Garud)

In September 2003, a Commando Force, known as *Garud*, with a total strength of 1,090 personnel, was established as a special branch of the Indian Air Force.

Though *Garud* is not a "secret" unit, very little is known about its operations and assignments, possibly because the National Security Guards and the MARCOS are the primary choices of the Indian Government for such operations. *Garud* personnel have been deployed to the Democratic Republic of Congo, as part of a United Nations peacekeeping contingent.

Special Forces for Counter-Insurgency Operations

The Commando Battalion for Resolute Action is a specialised unit of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), which was created to counter the Naxalite problem in India. This élite unit is one of the few units of the Central Armed Police Forces specifically trained in guerrilla warfare; it has been trained to track, hunt and eliminate small groups of Naxalite insurgents.

The need for dedicated Special Operations Forces was highlighted during the 1999 Kargil incident when Indian regular army units were sent to repel Pakistani soldiers and Kashmiri militants who had infiltrated the Indian side of the Line of Control. It was subsequently mentioned by the Kargil Review Committee. The need for an SOF was again felt during the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, when the Indian Government had to rely on the National Security Guards for counter-terrorism operations.

A Unified Special Forces Command

For India, the real issue is the need for a unified command for the Special Forces. In that context, the Indian SOF could also be put under the Integrated Defence Staff. Joint control and interoperability could also be enhanced by close co-operation with the three services.³

At present, the Integrated Defence Staff has a directorate, which administers the Amphibious and Special Forces but has no operational command. Some of the directorate's functions include:

- Co-ordinating with Services HQ to formulate a joint doctrine for Amphibious and Special Forces
- Co-ordinating with Services HQ to formulate training policy, including training in the Special Forces Doctrine
- Co-ordination of activities relating to training and doctrine for Amphibious and Special Forces with all outside agencies
- The establishment of amphibious cells

At present, the amphibious cell programme is at a nascent stage, which, in the years to come, will be expanded to facilitate greater synergies and co-ordination among the Army and Navy, leading to an SOF that can be deployed as an expeditionary force.⁴

Joint Special Operations Command

In October 2012, a proposal to have a joint command for the Special Forces was mooted in the Indian Cabinet Committee on Security.

³ Bhattacharya, P., 'Joint Special Operations Command within 5 yrs: Official', *Millennium Post*, 28 January 2013. <<http://www.millenniumpost.in/NewsContent.aspx?NID=19443>>.

⁴ Karnad, B., 'Shaping Indian Special Forces into a Strategic Asset', *Defence and Technology*, 1 December 2004, p. 48.

⁵ *Net Security Provider: India's Out-of-Area Contingency Operations*, IDSA Task Force Report,

Joint Special Operations Command (J-SOC) – if it becomes operational – is expected to be under the Integrated Defence Services headquarters and to include the existing special forces of the Army, Navy and Air Force.

The tasks now are to develop the overall operations philosophy, operational command structure and mechanics of creating a joint command bridging the three services.

The funds for such a command are expected to come from those already allocated to the Army. The personnel and equipment deployed by each service's Special Forces, particularly the Para-commandos, will be transferred to the joint command. For example, the new C-130J aircraft, which are now under the control of the Air Force, will be transferred to the J-SOC.

Considering that the three services will have to cede their control over personnel and materiel, the task of creating a consensus will not be easy. The force structure of the J-SOC will include, besides the Paras and Para Special Forces, the Marine Commandos of the Navy and the *Garud* commandos of the Air Force. The *Ghatak* special forces of the Army's infantry battalions will also be incorporated into the J-SOC. The new Command will have a major role to play in non-conventional and fourth-generation warfare and its establishment is long overdue.

Future Areas Where Indian Special Forces Could Be Deployed

a) For Counter-Insurgency Operations in Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh

The Commando Battalion for Resolute Action (CBRA) may be used in the future for counter-insurgency operations in Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh to flush out insurgents, in concert with forces from the host countries. Use of the CBRA would be in keeping with India's doctrine of the limited use of force for political objectives. Such operations would first involve the collection of intelligence by the Research and Analysis Wing, with the co-operation of Indian military intelligence. That material would then be provided to the Special Forces units engaged in the operation.

If India is to deploy units of its armed forces on operations outside its borders, it might consider adopting either the German command model (*Auftragstaktik*), the mission-oriented command as adopted by the British, or the United States model for low-intensity operations. These would all involve a shift from the existing, more rigid, *Befehlstaktik* or top-down, command style of the Indian Armed Forces, in which orders are taken from senior officers and those in the field have little room to adapt them to changing circumstances.

The Indian mission command now includes new digital command and control (C2) technologies, which have increased micro-management and given more mobility to the existing command culture. It nonetheless represents a paradigm shift in Indian counter-insurgency operations, based on lessons learnt during its Sri Lankan operations in 1987-89. In that conflict, a centralised command culture based in mainland India did not help the Indian Army's peace-keeping operations on the island. The chances of success in such operations are improved if they involve: mission-oriented tactics; effective collection of field intelligence from the governments; and, overall, a limited use of force for political ends.

b) Possible Coups in the western Indian Ocean: Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles

In the mostly unlikely event of coups or serious instability in the western Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy's MARCOS forces, with active logistics co-operation from the Western Fleet, would be the most likely to undertake operations. In accord with its general strategy of limiting the use of force, the Indian Government has begun to introduce the state-of-the-art equipment and specialised platforms needed to enhance the ability of the Special Forces to conduct maritime intervention operations and niche capabilities. In these operations, the Reorganised Amphibious Formation (RAMFOR), which will be able to launch offensive operations on enemy shores, could be used. For amphibious operations in locations such as Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles, the Special Operations forces would be backed by the Army's 54th Infantry Division, which has strength of over 10,000 soldiers. Three brigades are already qualified to carry out amphibious operations and the Army will base them in South India, West India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

If the Indian Government can intervene quickly before any third parties become involved, with an effective mission-oriented command style and active co-ordination of its amphibious divisions, the chances of success for such operations are high.⁵

c) For Counter-Insurgency Operations within India

For counter-insurgency operations against the Naxalite movement in heartland states, such as Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, the specialised CRPF unit discussed above is one of the few units of the Central Armed Police Forces specifically trained in guerrilla warfare. This élite fighting unit has been trained to track, hunt and eliminate small Naxalite groups. If the Naxalite movement increases its foothold in areas like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh with active support from the Maoists in Nepal, then specialised CRPF units could be deployed. In those circumstances, it might incur protests from both local populations and state governments condemning the praetorian role of the Indian armed forces. Such protests might decrease the chances of success of the operations, despite the proven credentials of the armed forces in carrying out domestic counter-insurgency operations. The chances of success in such operations would be increased if the Federal Government were sensitive to local sentiments and were able to reach a consensus with the state governments on the use of force.

d) Co-operating with the Indonesian Armed Forces

If the political situation were to decline substantially in the Indonesian provinces of Aceh and West Papua, India could, at the request of the Indonesian Government, despatch its *Garud* Special Forces, aided by the active co-ordination of intelligence from Indian Army intelligence, the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Indonesian Government. A further option might be the deployment of India's Special Forces based in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with active co-operation from Indonesia's *Kopassus* Special Forces.

⁵ *Net Security Provider: India's Out-of-Area Contingency Operations*, IDSA Task Force Report, New Delhi: Magnum Books, 2012.
<<http://www.idsa.in/book/NetSecurityProviderIndiasOutofAreaContingencyOperations>>.

The Indian Army's amphibious brigade stationed at Port Blair under Fortress Commander, Andaman and Nicobar – the only integrated command in the Indian military – could also be used if intervention were required in any of the South-East Asian countries.

In all the hypothetical scenarios discussed above, especially those beyond India's borders, the role of Army Headquarters would be limited to issues relating to the political direction of the campaign, including any corrections that may have to be effected. The actual conduct of the operations would thus lie with the operational commander.

An even more ideal arrangement, however, would be the establishment of a joint tri-service command for the Special Forces, to enable seamless integration between the air, land and naval components during any future regional stability operations. At the least, a tri-service Rapid Reaction Force, with a command culture based on mission-oriented tactics, would aid an effective overall military and political strategy. In any event, India is still yet to develop a robust command culture suitable to undertake operations under a single command in areas beyond its borders.

In Conclusion

As an emerging power in the Indo-Pacific region, India could be urged to use its Special Forces for political objectives. Those forces would, however, be deployed in specific circumstances and, in the years to come, under a joint command under the overall aegis of the Integrated Defence Staff.⁶ Even so, as was demonstrated during the Sri Lankan operations in the late 1980s, a centralised command culture is not optimal for the extended deployment of Special Forces. Those operations require decentralised, mission-oriented tactics to achieve an effective strategic outcome.

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⁶ Kalyanaraman, S., 'Major Lessons from Operation *Pawan* for Future Regional Stability Operations', *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, № 3, 2012, pp. 29-52.
<http://www.idsa.in/jds/6_3_2012_MajorLessonsfromOperationPawanforFutureRegionalStabilityOperations_SKalyanaraman>.

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