
Special Forces: Recent Operations Globally and India's Own Experience

Dhruv C Katoch

Special Forces (also called SF) may be defined as forces organised, trained, and equipped to conduct special operations with an emphasis on unconventional warfare capabilities. Special operations encompass the use of small units in direct or indirect military actions focussed on strategic or operational objectives. They require units with combinations of trained specialised personnel, equipment, and tactics that exceed the routine capabilities of conventional military forces. They are characterised by certain attributes that cumulatively distinguish them from conventional operations.¹ SF missions may also be politically sensitive, wherein failure may lead to loss of national prestige. As such, only the best equipped and most proficient forces must be employed to avoid detection and possible mission failure.

What exactly are Special Forces? By their very nomenclature, these are required for special roles and are, thus, different from regular infantry or parachute regiments. Expanding on the issue of SF in the Indian context, Lt Gen PC Katoch, a veteran paratrooper, makes the pertinent point that airborne forces are not Special Forces and the two cannot be equated, primarily due to the difference in the roles of the SF and airborne forces. Once the latter are paradropped behind enemy lines, their role is akin to

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any air-landed infantry battalion—holding ground till the link-up is established.² This role was effectively played and demonstrated by the Indian forces in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, when 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment, commanded by Col KS Pannu, made history for the Indian Army in being the first post-war Para Battalion Group to carry out an airborne assault in

enemy territory. The operation took place on December 11, 1971, at Tangail, in erstwhile Pakistan (now Bangladesh).³

A similar point was made on April 22, 2002, by Lt Gen RK Nanavatty, while he was the serving Northern Army Commander. The General, who had earlier as a Brigadier headed the Commando Cell in the Military Operations Directorate said, “...I find the vision blurring in certain quarters on the issue of Para and Para (SF). I am very clear that a parachute battalion is simply an infantry battalion in an airborne role and has nothing in common with a Special Forces battalion. The Special Forces are not a game of numbers and I for one am against their expansion of any sorts. We must consolidate and modernise our existing Special Forces resources”.⁴ This perhaps is the reason why modern Armies across the world have made a clear-cut distinction between airborne and Special Forces. The US 82 and 101 Airborne Divisions are, thus, separate from the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Similarly, the British maintain their Special Air Service (SAS) separate from the British Parachute Regiment. The Germans, Chinese and Pakistanis do likewise.

Before delving further into the subject, it is important to understand the types of operations that Special Forces may be required to undertake. A case study of the rescue operation launched in November 2015 in this regard is instructive as it highlights the role and the challenges faced by the SF in modern conflict situations.

The Rescue Mission

Rescue of the Trapped Russian Pilot

Not much has been written in the Western or Indian media about the brilliant planning, execution and conduct of the mission launched jointly by Russia, Iran and Syria to rescue a trapped Russian pilot. This has much to do both with the geo-politics of the region as also with the selective coverage of world events by the Western media. Russia intervened directly in the ongoing civil war in Syria, only on September 30, 2015, launching

an air campaign in support of President Assad of Syria, who is fighting to save his regime both from the Islamic State (IS) as also from the Free Syrian Army (FSA)⁵ and other rebel groups that are seeking to overthrow his government through the use of military force. While the US and other Western powers are also fighting the IS, they are supporting the FSA against Assad.

On November 24, 2015, a Russian Su-24 fighter aircraft, on a strike mission against the IS and other rebel groups, was shot down by an air-to-air missile launched by a Turkish F-16 jet. As per the monitoring group, “Syrian Observatory for Human Rights”, the warplane crashed in a mountainous area in the northern countryside of Latakia province, where there had been aerial bombardment earlier and where pro-government forces have been battling insurgents on the ground. The location of the crash site was just 4 km from the Turkish border.⁶ The Turks claimed that the Russian fighter had violated Turkish air space—a charge hotly denied by the Russians. The two-member crew ejected, but the pilot, Lt Col Oleg Peshkov was killed by ground fire. The parachute of the co-pilot,

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Captain Konstantin Murahtin, fortunately, drifted towards a forested area in which he hid himself. Two Russian helicopters sent to rescue Murahtin, soon after the downing of the aircraft, came under rebel fire from the FSA and the Turkey backed Turkmen, a rebel group operating in the area. One helicopter was hit, resulting in a soldier being killed and the mission was aborted.

The Russians by this time received credible intelligence that a number of special Turkish units had been sent to the scene to capture the Russian pilot alive, ostensibly with a view to pressurising Russia at a later stage. Gen Soleimani, the Commander of Iran's elite Quds force of the Revolutionary Guards, contacted the Russians and proposed the formation of a special task force, composed of Hezbollah's Special Forces and Syrian commandos trained by Iran, all of whom had good knowledge of the local terrain. The Russians were to provide air cover and satellite intelligence.⁷ This was agreed to.

The pilot was located by means of a personal locator beacon, a hand-held radio that also contains a beacon transmitter, which was part of the pilot's equipment. His location was identified 6 km deep inside territory held by the FSA. The ground element of the rescue operation consisted of 24 commandos, six of whom were from Hezbollah's special operation unit and 18 were Syrian commandos. Russian Army air-assault and attack helicopters could not directly fly in close to the area of operations because the FSA and the Turkmen were holding FN-6 MANPADS [a third generation passive infrared (IR) homing Man Portable Air Defence System] of Chinese origin (these are reengineered MISTRALS), that were procured by Saudi Arabia from Sudan's military stocks and then supplied to the FSA. It was, hence, necessary to go in for a ground-based operation. To assist the ground force, the Russians electronically sanitised the area, stretching to several kilometres from the target area, to blind all hostile satellites and communication equipment in the area of operations. The Electronic Warfare (EW) effort from the air was

provided by a Russian marine EW detachment, which primarily resorted to the Global Positioning System (GPS) and communication jamming, to prevent Western satellites from picking up details of the rescue mission and leaking these to the FSA/rebels.⁸

The movement of the rescue team was monitored by Russian satellites. The commandos were constantly provided real time information of hostile movement for the entire duration of the operation, each moment of which was also reported to a very high ranking official in the Kremlin, who, some believe, was the Russian President himself.⁹ While reaching the forest area, the commandos came in contact with Turkmen rebels operating in the area, some of whom were also searching for the surviving pilot. All such elements were eliminated. The Russian Air Force was also effectively employed against the rebels, forcing most of them to flee the area. This paved the way for the successful conduct of ground operations. The 24-member commando team, finally closed in with the objective, after infiltrating 6 km deep inside FSA-held territory and made contact with the co-pilot, Captain Konstantin Murahtin. In the operation, a large number of Turkmen rebels were killed and their hi-tech equipment was destroyed. The entire operation was conducted over a period of 12 hours. At its conclusion, at 0040 hrs GMT, on November 25, all the 24-members of the Special Force returned safely to their base, along with the rescued pilot and the body of Lt Col Oleg Peshkov, without a single casualty. Once out of the area, the commandos, along with the pilot, were airlifted to Hemeimeem, the Russian air base in Latakia province. A dangerous mission had been successfully accomplished by November 26, within 24 hours of the jet being downed – undoubtedly remaining a remarkable achievement.

Highlights of the Operation

In its planning and execution, the operation was brilliant. The speed at which the operation was launched took the FSA and the Turkmen rebels

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by surprise. Given the complicated nature of the operation, the rebels never imagined that such rapid planning and action by the rescue squads could be possible. Speed in the execution of operations will, however, depend on having well trained and equipped forces operationally ready for such tasks. It would also require political decision-making of a high order. EW also played an important role in the operation. The area of operation was electronically sanitised by the Russians, preventing the Western powers from getting an inkling of what was happening on the ground. Such capabilities, when enmeshed into SF operations, give high dividends and are today an essential part of such missions.

The terrorists present in the region possessed very modern and advanced military equipment for ground-to-ground and ground-to-air warfare—which is not supplied even to a large number of countries which are Washington’s North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies. Special Forces will increasingly be confronted by hostile forces which are well armed and trained. They must, hence, be a cut above the rest, if success is to be achieved. A unique feature of the operation was its international character. Here, the assets of three countries came into play, which speaks volumes of the calibre of the agencies involved, given the fact that time in the execution of operations was at a premium. The operation also highlighted the effective and synchronous functioning among different wings of the armed forces of the participating countries, which, in turn, led to success.

Other Special Forces Operations Worldwide

Perhaps the SF operation which has garnered maximum worldwide attention till date has been the killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan on May 2, 2011, shortly after 1:00 am local time by the US SEAL

Team Six, the classified US special operations unit. *The Independent*, a UK newspaper, quoting the *New York Times*, said that this Navy Special Forces unit that officially operates under the cover name Naval Special Warfare Development Group, has now increased to more than 300 “operators” and 1,500 back-up personnel. Both the US and UK have expanded the use of SF, following the invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 and the subsequent decade of tough, relentless operations against the Taliban fighters.¹⁰

Israel too has a long history of Special Force’s activation and deployment, dating even before the official declaration of the Israeli state and the formation of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in 1948. Formed in 1948 as the Special Reconnaissance Platoon, they now consist of elite commando, counter-terrorist, anti-terrorist and reconnaissance units. Amongst these are the Shayetet-13, Sayeret Matkal and Shaldag. Shayetet-13 is the Israeli naval commando unit, comparable to the US Navy SEALs. An extremely secretive unit, it is used for both land and sea operations, long-range missions and hostage rescue situations both in and outside the borders of Israel. Sayeret Matkal or the General Staff Reconnaissance Unit 269 is primarily dedicated to hostage rescue and is also tasked with the most risky intelligence gathering operations. Shaldag – officially the Special-Surface Air Designation Team (Unit 5101)—is the elite commando unit of the Israeli Air Force. Very little is known about this force. Shaldag commandos took part in Operations ‘Moses’ and ‘Solomon’, in which thousands of Jews were airlifted out of Ethiopia to Israel. Shaldag was also reportedly involved in Operation ‘Orchard’ in 2007 when Israeli Air Force jets successfully destroyed a nuclear reactor inside Syria.¹¹ Israeli covert forces have participated in daring, clandestine operations in both Israel and in enemy territory, the most well publicised operation being the famed 1976 raid on Entebbe. The mission, to rescue Israeli hostages from Palestinian guerrillas who had hijacked an Air France plane that had taken off from Tel Aviv and redirected it to

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Uganda, was successfully executed. Not all operations are foolproof though. In May 2010, Israeli Special Forces intercepted the Mavi Marmara, a Turkish aid ship attempting to break the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. During the operation, nine activists, most of them Turkish nationals, were killed. An international uproar ensued in which members of the Special Forces were accused of using deadly force on people who, some

say, had not initiated violence. An Israeli inquiry into the incident found that the troops acted in self-defence and, therefore, did not break international law.¹²

The SAS (Special Air Service) Regiment is a corps of the British Army and a part of the United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF) commanded by the Director, Special Forces. The SAS is one of the world’s most renowned and respected Special Forces regiments whose role includes counter-terrorism and reconnaissance. The UKSF was formed in 1987 to draw together the Army’s SAS and the Naval Service’s Special Boat Squadron, which was renamed the Special Boat Service (SBS) during the formation, into a unified command, based around the former Director, SAS, who was given the additional title of Director, Special Forces. The SBS’s expertise is in Maritime Counter-Terrorism (MCT) and amphibious warfare.¹³ The SAS Regiment actually refers to three regiments known as the 21st SAS Regiment, 22nd SAS Regiment and 23rd SAS Regiment. The 22nd SAS Regiment is a part of the regular Army, while the 22nd and 23rd SAS Regiments are a part of the reserve Territorial Army. From its formal formation in 1952, the 22nd SAS Regiment has carried out a number of operations and private security in many parts of the world. These included ‘Operation Nimrod’ which was carried out during the Iranian Embassy siege in London in 1980. In a 17-minute action, the

soldiers of the 22nd SAS regiment rescued 24 of the remaining 25 hostages and killed 5 out of 6 terrorists without losing a single man.¹⁴ To cater to the challenges posed by the Islamic State, the British Army now has plans to develop a new tier of “specialised forces” to train locals in foreign danger zones. The emphasis here is on expanding the force with experts and specialists in various military fields, to provide Britain with an opportunity to show worldwide leadership and tackle emerging radicalism, wherever it may be, head on.¹⁵

The Importance of Special Forces

The SF can be effectively employed to shape the security narrative and minimise the need for larger deployments of conventional forces. However, even within the military, their role is but imperfectly understood. In the domain of civil policy-makers, there is a complete lack of comprehension of the role and function of the SF. They are neither a panacea nor an insignificant oddity. If utilised correctly, they achieve spectacular results. Used poorly, their capabilities and, sometimes, their lives, are wasted.¹⁶ It is important to understand that Special Operations require unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training. They will mostly be conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments, are time-sensitive, clandestine, have low visibility and involve a high degree of risk. That is why they are different from conventional military

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operations. Such operations fall into two categories: direct and indirect. The former consists of raids and other operations that directly target the enemy. They are characterised by technologically-enabled small-unit precision lethality, focussed intelligence, and inter-agency cooperation integrated on a digitally-networked battlefield. Extreme in risk, precise in execution and able to deliver a high pay-off, the impacts of the direct approach are immediate, visible to [the] public and have tremendous effects on the intended target. The indirect approach is characterised by the long-term commitments of the SF to help enable and aid other nations to improve their own military forces and security. In such operations, it is important to understand the following:¹⁷

- People, not equipment, make the critical difference in the success or failure of a mission.
- The quality of personnel makes a difference in such operations and not mere numbers.
- Special Forces cannot be mass produced. It takes years to train operational units to the level of proficiency needed to accomplish difficult and specialised SF missions.
- Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.
- The operational effectiveness of deployed forces cannot be, and never has been, achieved without being enabled by all the joint Service partners. Hence, the need for an all arms approach while conducting such operations.

The five principles enunciated above offer key insights into the SF's role and functioning. They are precious assets that take time, effort, and investment to develop, and are not suitable for "big-scale" tasks; suddenly deciding to "make more" of them is a foolish and irresponsible goal. They remain a small part of a nation's military strength, and are

not a replacement for any other part of the military. In essence, SF core activities encompass the following:¹⁸

- Short-duration strikes in hostile, denied, or diplomatically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets.
- Clandestine reconnaissance and surveillance to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in conventional forces.
- Operations to combat weapons of mass destruction.
- Counter-terrorism operations under conditions that are most conducive for the employment of conventional forces to neutralise terrorists and their networks.
- Actions taken to enable an indigenous resistance movement to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power.
- Hostage rescue and recovery missions.
- Support to a comprehensive civilian and military effort to contain and ultimately defeat an insurgency and address its root causes.
- The Special Operation Force (SOF) is particularly adept at using an indirect approach to positively influence segments of the indigenous population.

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India's Special Forces

Role clarity with respect to the creation and employment of SF units in the Indian armed forces requires greater focus. Of essence is an understanding of the fact that SF are unique and require to be organised, equipped, trained and administered for the role that they are expected to play. In the early 1990s, Gen BC Joshi as the Army Chief, appreciated such a need. Under him, the three parachute commando

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battalions were renamed as Special Forces Battalions and the Headquarters Special Forces (HQSF) and a Special Forces Training School (SFTS) too were raised. HQSF was, however, later broken up and disbanded.

Today, the Indian Army has nine SF battalions.¹⁹ Increasingly, the distinction between parachute battalions and SF is getting blurred, which does not augur well for the type of roles the Special Forces are best suited for. Simply having larger numbers is meaningless without an understanding of how Special Forces need to be employed. Here lies the biggest weakness, as commanders tend to

use such forces as normal infantry. Using the SF for routine operations is, however, counter-productive as witnessed recently in the Pampore encounter, that took place in February 2016. Here, teams of 9 Para (SF) were employed to flush out terrorists holed up in a building in Pampore. This was a task for regular infantry battalions and did not require the insertion of the SF. While the three terrorists were eliminated, the SF lost two officers and one jawan before the mission could be successfully completed. Why a routine infantry task was given to the SF denotes a bankruptcy of thought and a lack of understanding of the tasks that the SF should be employed on. There has been suitable employment of the SF also, as witnessed in the employment of 21 Para (SF), in June 2015, to target terrorist camps in neighbouring Myanmar. In a surgical strike, troops of 21 Para (SF), crossed the international border and struck two terrorist camps, destroying both, and inflicting huge casualties on the terrorists based there. They successfully exfiltrated thereafter, achieving

total success without suffering any casualties. While the operation was a success, an adverse fall-out was the publication of pictures of the men who took part in the operation. This constitutes a serious breach in security as such operations must always be kept under wraps.

Conceptually, there still appears to be a lack of comprehension amongst both the military leadership as also the political authority on the role and employment of Special Forces in the Indian context. Mindless expansion of SF units cannot give the requisite pay-offs in the absence of role clarity. Once the roles are defined, then specific units must be equipped, trained and tasked for the purpose. Such tasks could encompass targeting of terrorist leadership, both within India and abroad, intelligence gathering operations, targeted strikes in enemy held areas, and the like. The training and equipping of such forces is a long-term investment and precious resources must be devoted to capability enhancement and not frittered away in increasing numbers. The Navy's SF, the Marcos (Marine Commandos), was created in 1987. The force was employed during the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, but lack of role clarity led to sub-optimal results. The SF for the Air Force, the Garud Commando Force was primarily created to protect Air Force installations from terrorist attacks. Their performance against terrorists in the Pathankot terror attack was again sub-optimal, which points once again to lack of role clarity.

Recommendations

What do we want from our SF? The roles envisaged for our SF must be clearly enunciated, if they are to shape the security narrative. They require unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment, and training. An understanding of the same by the political and military leadership is essential. Otherwise, they will continue to be used as regular infantry. Fewer and more capable forces will give far greater dividends than mere increase in numbers. Grouping all SF under a separate command

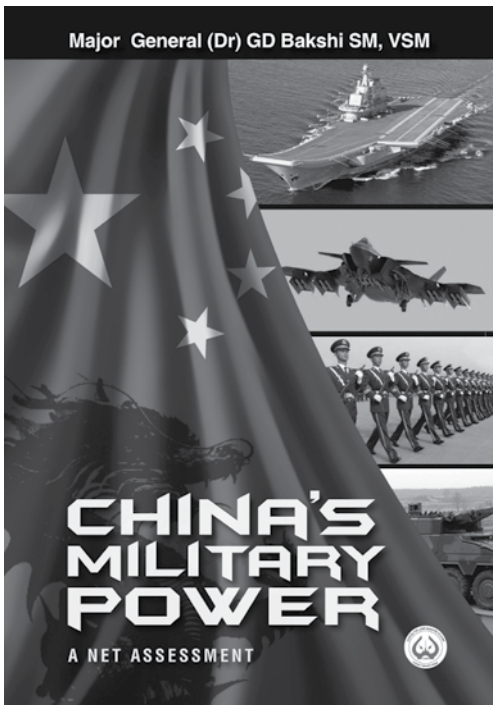
would, hence, give better pay-offs in terms of training, equipping and employment.

Future conflicts will demand a very high degree of coordination among the three wings of the military and also with the political leadership. This aspect continues to remain India's Achilles heel. For maximum effect, we need to integrate the three Services, to achieve the desired synergy levels in operations. Within this construct, the role that the SF are to play must be defined. Integration of the forces will meet with resistance, as past experience shows, but this will have to be overcome by the political authority on the lines of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defence Reorganisation Act of 1986, signed into law by President Reagan. The Ministry of Defence, staffed as it is by a large body of civilian officials, with limited, if any, knowledge of military matters, will also need a large infusion of military personnel, to perhaps also include the post of Defence Secretary. That is what must be aimed at, now.

Notes

1. *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, Chapter 1, available at http://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/sof-ref-2-1/SOFREF_Ch1.htm
2. As cited in <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/equating-airborne-forces-with-special-forces/>
3. For details of the operation, see Lt Gen Nirbhay Sharma, "The Story of the Indian Army's First Airborne Assault", in Dhruv C Katoch and Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir, eds., *LIBERATION: Bangladesh 1971* (Bloomsbury, India, 2015) pp. 133-140.
4. As quoted by PC Katoch in his article "Equating Airborne Forces with Special Forces", available at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/equating-airborne-forces-with-special-forces/>
5. The FSA is a group of officers and men who defected from the Syrian Army in the ongoing civil war in Syria, with an avowed aim to bring about regime change through the use of military force. It was formed in 2011 and consists mainly of Sunni Muslims (90 per cent); the remaining 10 percent consists of Shia Alawites and some Druze fighters.
6. See <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN0TD0IR20151125>
7. See <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940905000553>
8. Ibid.

9. See <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20151128/1030912844/qasem-soleimani-IRGC-syria-su-24-pilot.html>
10. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/navy-seal-team-six-unit-that-killed-osama-bin-laden-has-become-global-manhunting-machine-with-10303430.html>
11. See http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Society_&_Culture/forcestoc.html
12. See http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2069886_2069891_2069843,00.html
13. See <http://www.eliteukforces.info>
14. See <http://www.sasregiment.org.uk>
15. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12080624/We-need-a-new-tier-of-British-special-forces-to-take-the-fight-to-Isil.html>
16. Steven P Bucci, "The Importance of Special Operations Forces Today and Going Forward," available at <http://index.heritage.org/military/2015/important-essays-analysis/importance-special-operations-forces-today-going-forward/>
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. The nine SF battalions of the Indian Army being referred to here are: 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 21 Para (SF)



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