



CLAWS

Special Forces: Revamp and Restructure

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Introduction

The November 26 terrorist attack in Mumbai and related events have brought into sharp focus the Special Forces (SF) of the nation. India fields a variety of SF, of which two—the Marine Commandos (MARCOS) of the navy and the National Security Guards (NSG) of the Cabinet Secretariat—operated against the terrorists at Mumbai. While the personnel of both forces displayed exceptional courage in tackling the terrorists, lacunae in the deployment and employment of these forces need early rectification in order for the SF to respond with alacrity the next time a similar situation arises. Details of what needs to be done to increase the efficiency of these forces must necessarily be preceded by an elucidation of what the SF are all about.

Most professional militaries field special units, with specialised, highly focussed capabilities. Known as SF, these are small, elite military units, with special training and equipment, capable of conducting a variety of operations. SF personnel undergo rigorous selection and lengthy, specialised training. SF are the nation's penetration and strike forces that respond to extraordinary contingencies across the conflict spectrum, with stealth, speed and precision. Their operations differ from conventional operations in the degree of physical

and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence of a very high order. SF may be used against a wide range of adversaries, including terrorists, insurgents, guerrillas, or regular combatants.

In our country, a proliferation of SF types reduces focus on certain essential tasks, undermines cost-effectiveness, and sullies accountability. Weaknesses and chinks in the system need to be identified and highlighted while deliberating on the changes needed to evolve the nation's SF structure of the future.

Changing Nature of Threats

Ambiguity and a marked divergence from traditional risks characterise security challenges today and in the future. Consequently, military contingencies require multifaceted forces, like the SF, as they are able to respond to a wider spectrum of crises. Terrorism, subversion, insurgency, and proxy war by neighbouring countries or by non-state actors from their soil will continue to be major security challenges for India. The recent terrorist strike at Mumbai is an appropriate example. In this type of proxy war environment, the SF, given their low profile, may well be the forces of choice for conducting operations,

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including across the border, without inviting the political, economic, and military risks of war. SF can also assist in deterring, destroying, or defending against attempts aimed at nuclear or radiological material or weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), especially from non-state actors.

Several constraints impede the employment of conventional forces to resolve security issues. With asymmetric opponents such as terrorists, insurgents and rebel groups increasingly holding the nation to ransom, dealing with them in a conventional manner has many pitfalls. In such an environment, SF become even more important. Asymmetric opponents do not attack the strengths of the nation, but target its vulnerabilities, with unorthodox measures. Such attacks can be best tackled by the SF.

Preparing for the conflicts of the next decade and beyond, we need to invest heavily in the right kind of SF, with the agility to perform a task, disengage, regroup and be ready for the next mission. SF to tackle low intensity conflicts of the future must be purpose-filled organisations, possessing both human intelligence and signals intelligence capabilities; scientific and analytical skills; and ability to use information technology optimally. They must also possess language skills and knowledge of the cultural, social and behaviour patterns of the adversary.

In future, SF will become more relevant because they can respond to a wider spectrum of crises than conventional forces. Unfortunately, the SF of the Indian Army, as structured at present, are not capable of doing this. However, if restructuring is

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carried out with vision and all likely contingencies are catered for, there is no reason why our SF cannot meet such challenges.

SF of India

The biggest component of SF is fielded by the Indian Army, but other forces too have SF of varying capabilities. Currently, the SF component of the Indian Army comprises a number of Para (SF) battalions. While five such battalions have existed for over a decade, the others were converted by redesignating all parachute battalions about three years ago. The other SF of India include a battalion of the Rashtriya Rifles – 31 RR (Commando), the Indian Navy's MARCOS, two forces operating under the Cabinet Secretariat, viz. the NSG and the Special Frontier Force (SFF) and the Garuda Commando Force of the Indian Air Force. Some states have designated some police units as commandos but these are of little value. All these forces have different tasks, ranging from counter-insurgency to anti-hijacking, to guerrilla warfare, and so on. The total strength of all the different forces combined would be fairly substantial, and would compare favourably with the strengths of the SF of the US and Russia.

Capable of carrying out only 'direct action' type of operations, like raids, direct and indirect assaults, and other attrition-oriented tasks, the various SF of India, however, are neither organised nor doctrinally prepared to carry out tasks which their counterparts in some other countries are capable of conducting. These include tasks like unconventional warfare, special deep reconnaissance, psychological operations, counter-proliferation and sensitive special operations. Unfortunately, earlier attempts in the army to form SF units in the genre of the Special Air Service (SAS) of the UK, or the Special Operations Forces (SOF) of the USA were met with scepticism, if not downright hostility.

The major reason is the focus of the Indian Army on attrition-oriented operations and linear thinking. Consequently, para commandos of the

past, or Para (SF), as they are now termed, have largely been employed as super or elite-infantry, with a focus on attrition-dominated tasks. No doubt, they have performed well, but they still are not trained for typical SF roles. On occasions, they have also been employed on mundane and wasteful tasks, such as VIP protection or protective tasks at higher headquarters.

Future Dispensation

The fragmented structure of India's SF is not conducive to efficient management and needs reorganisation. As an immediate measure, the SF of the army, navy and air force need to be placed under a separate tri-Service command controlled by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), once that appointment becomes a reality, and in the interim, under the Integrated Defence Staff and the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

In most countries, the SF are also tasked for anti-hijacking and hostage rescue. However, in India, these tasks have been assigned to an independent organisation, the NSG. Besides not being a cost-effective option, these tasks are actually carried out by personnel of the army, who constitute the entire complement of the Special Action Group (SAG) of the NSG, and are on deputation from the army. The other portion of the NSG, the Special Rangers Group (SRG), which is manned by personnel from the central police forces, has over the years, degenerated into a force almost exclusively assigned to VIP security. Proximity to politicians, who constitute the bulk of the VIPs, has an adverse impact on their primary function, as well as on their discipline, deportment and professional efficiency.

At this stage, let us take a deeper look at the actions of the NSG during the recent Mumbai mayhem. Although the SAG did clear the three buildings that had been occupied by a total of eight Pakistani terrorists, it took them three days to do so. Earlier, the NSG took nearly ten hours to reach Mumbai. Now, four hubs are being created to pre-position NSG commandos, so that in the future, time can be saved in mobilising them. However, no effort is being made

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to rectify systemic problems of leadership, structures and decentralisation of authority. Although the commandos are brave and well trained on account of being selected personnel of the army, the leadership does not inspire confidence.

Leadership comes from professional experience and not by wearing the rank badges of a three star general. Under a seasoned army leader, the task at Mumbai would have been accomplished in 24 hours at the most. In this context the following aspects need to be highlighted:

- Although the main SAG group is located at Manesar, a small immediate response team is always stationed at the Palam airport to respond at short notice. This should have been dispatched immediately by commandeering an aircraft. They would have acted as the advance party, collected vital information and would have set the stage for the main body.
- There was no need to wait for a slow flying aircraft to fetch up from Chandigarh, when the NSG is empowered by law to requisition any available aircraft, without waiting for any permission. Such on the spot decisions are the forte on which the SF are organised, but policemen who head this elite force do not have the sense of urgency or the capacity to take such decisions.
- As complete information will never be available when the operations are launched, plans must be ready to get reinforcements.

First of all, a three star officer of the army should be handed over command of the NSG. This should have been done long ago, but the lethargy of a



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status quo bureaucracy and the vested interests of the Indian Police Service (IPS) lobby have acted as bottlenecks. There is a strong case for withdrawing the SAG complement from the NSG, and assigning the anti-hijacking and hostage rescue roles to the reorganised SF. The residual NSG can be restructured for the exclusive role of VIP security.

Second, SF component in the Cabinet Secretariat, viz. the SFF, the special role for which it was raised, has changed over the years. However, the force still has value and needs to be retained, perhaps with some restructuring and a reorientation of its manpower policies. Its grouping as a separate force under the Cabinet Secretariat, however, is now meaningless. It should become part of the SF of the army, albeit retaining its distinctive structure and ethos, and assigning it a changed role, which is more relevant to current and future realities.

Needs to Evolve and Improve

Most analysts agree that sub-conventional operations are likely to be the norm in the future, wherein the SF are likely to play a major role. Therefore, it is important that India evolves a suitable doctrine, concept of employment and organisational structures for the SF, which are relevant and best suited to meet future security challenges. In the coming years and decades, the SF are likely to be in great demand, as they will be particularly suited for many emerging missions. Many such missions will require traditional SF capabilities, while others, such as counter-proliferation

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and information warfare are relatively new and are the subject of developing SF doctrine.

The SF have to be ready to meet two major challenges. While they must integrate with conventional forces, government agencies, other forces and international agencies, when needed, they must also preserve their autonomy to protect and encourage the unconventional approach. Now that the strategic focus of the nation is not confined only to South Asia, language capability and regional and cultural orientation for the SF are also important.

A special force which is merely better infantry will not meet the requirement. The need is for SF which are structured comprehensively for the full spectrum capability, trained and ready for victory, or, in other words, a total force of quality officers and soldiers. The future organisational structure must be a value-based organisation, which is fully joint, is equipped with the most modern weapons and equipment the nation can provide, and is able to respond to the nation's needs. The nation's SF must change to meet the challenges of the 21st century. *Courtesy: SP's LandForces, Vol.5, No.6*



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Views expressed in this Issue Brief are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



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