



The Game Changer

Without losing any more time, government must sanction Special Operations Command

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN AND deliberated by the armed forces and defence strategists over the years on the need to empower and equip India's Special Operation Forces (SOF) to make them a force multiplier, a game changer, a rapid deployment force, a threat in being, and a major component of our comprehensive national power. However, not enough has been done.

On 3 November 1988, 50 independent parachute brigade/6 battalion, the parachute regiment spearheaded Operation Cactus (Maldives) to rescue the then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and restore the duly elected government of Maldives after Abdullah Luthufi had taken over the island nation in an early morning coup. The operation launched conjointly by the army, navy and the air force was successfully accomplished without a single casualty.

Consequent to Operation Cactus, *Time* magazine carried a cover story on 3 April 1989 acclaiming India as a regional power. At home, the success of this operation mostly went unnoticed as did a few important lessons learnt. Had it failed, maybe India too, would have created structures and organisations to exploit the full potential of SOF to safeguard national interest and assets.

The United States (US) established the US Special Operations Command (USSOC) comprising the SOF of the three services and Marines, in the aftermath of the failure of Operation Eagle Claw to rescue American diplomats held hostage at the US Embassy at Tehran in April 1980. Ever since, the US SOF, as an integral part of USSOC, has spearheaded and projected US hard power across the world, thus safeguarding the national interests. The synergy and the structured jointness of US SOF and command and control also ensured a flawlessly planned and surgically executed Operation Geronimo to neutralise Osama bin Laden at Abbottabad, Pakistan in May 2011.

As Operation Cactus was executed with surgical precision and total success, it failed to highlight the most important lesson, the need for a tailor-made joint organisation, compris-

ing all elements of SOF fully integrated, equipped, trained and designated under a single command and control structure, with direct access to the country's highest decision making body, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).

The ministry of defence (MoD) website on India's security environment overview defines the strategic space as 'India's size, strategic location, trade interests in a security environment that extends from Persian Gulf in the west, to the Straits of Malacca in the east and from the CAR in the north to near the Equator in the south, underpin India's security response. In view of the strategic spread, it is essential for the country to maintain a credible land, air and maritime force to safeguard its security interests.'

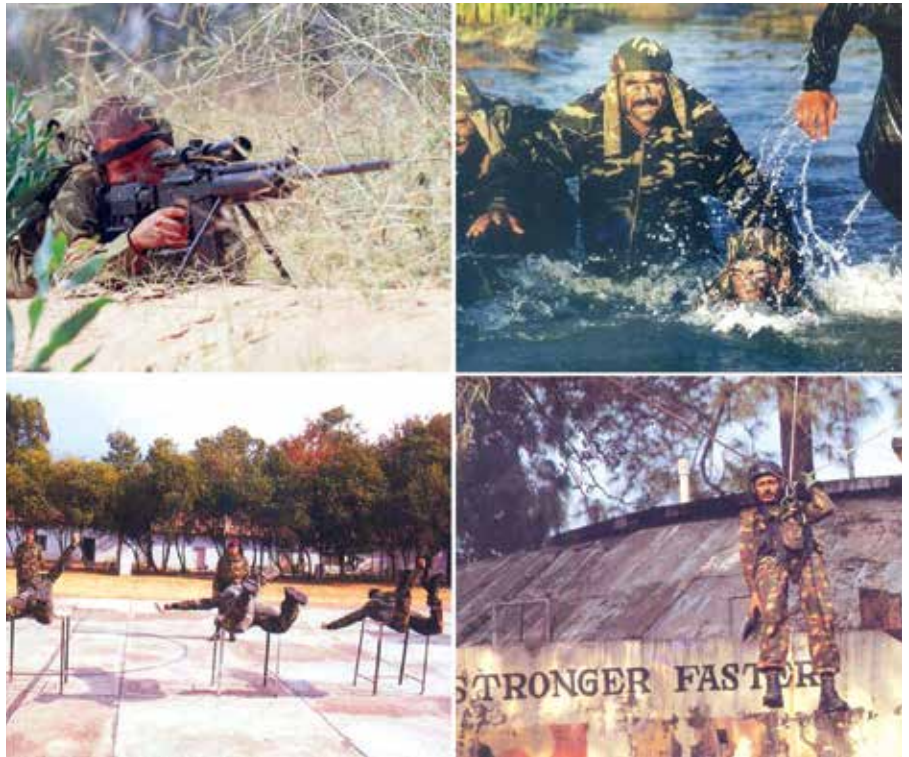
India's security concerns are impacted by a dynamic global and regional security environment. As India transforms from an emerging and rising power to a risen, responsible power, it

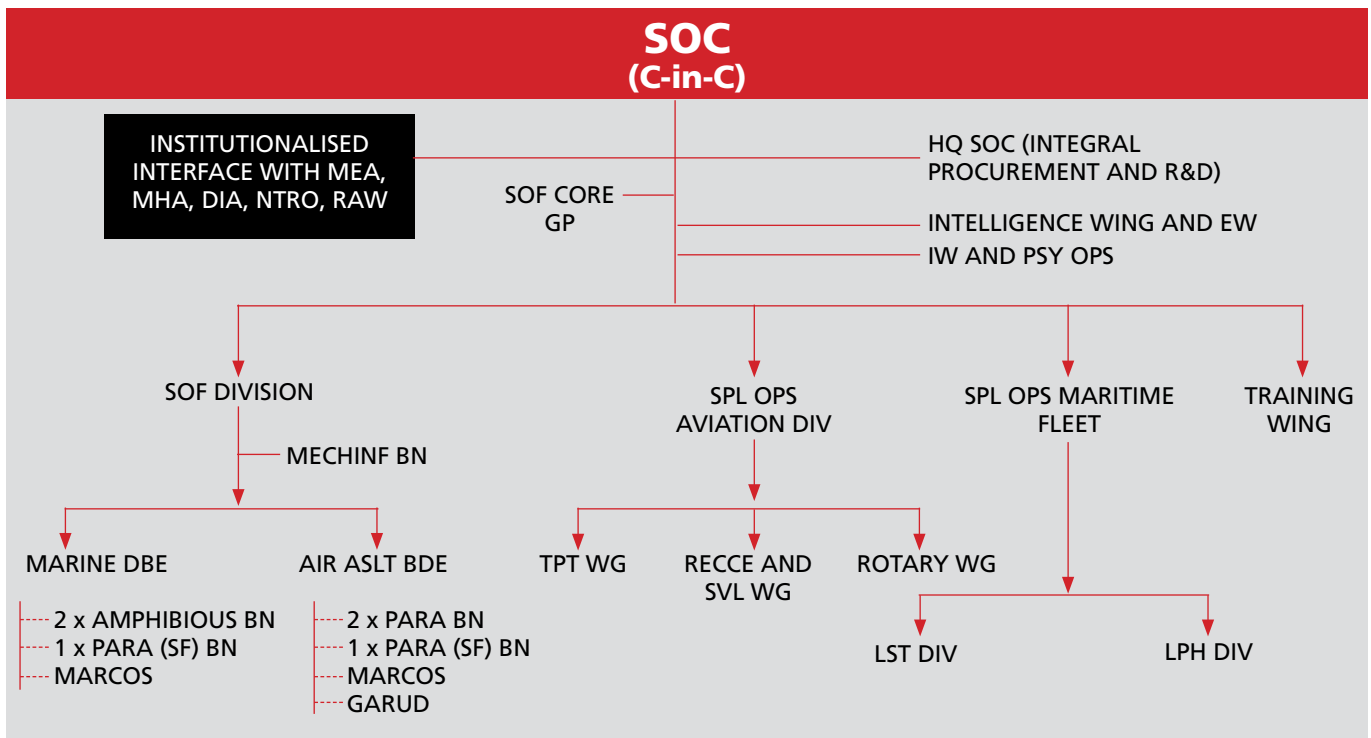
will need credible military capabilities to project military power, assist friendly foreign countries in times of crisis from unconventional threats and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The continuing proxy war with Pakistan, the ever increasing and omnipresent threat from terrorists, and the imperative to safeguard our national interests and assets dictate that we enhance capacities and build capabilities to face future threats and challenges.

India boasts of the second largest army, the fourth largest air force and a blue water capability for the navy to ensure our territorial integrity against external threats and internal security. What the nation lacks is a credible rapid deployment and effective special operations capability, to meet emerging security challenges in the regional and global context.

What are special operations? These can be defined as 'Unconventional military operations, undertaken in a hostile

DEEP ASSETS Indian Army Special Forces during training that prepares them for the complete spectrum of conflict, ranging from conventional to covert operations





or politically sensitive environment, to achieve political and military objectives at national, strategic and operational level and to safeguard economic interests. Their arena extends the complete spectrum of conflict and ranges from direct action to covert and clandestine operations. These are undertaken mostly in concert with other elements of national power.

As such operations have international and national ramifications, it is essential to create an appropriate political understanding. The national polity needs to comprehend the options and the associated risk sensitivity compared to out-of-proportion results and limited escalation dynamics. As India has grown in stature and economic power, it will become more and more vulnerable to unconventional and terrorist threats on its nationals and assets around the world. It is now an imperative to synergise the SOF under a single command to meet future challenges. The structure of SOF is a major indicator of a nation's will and capabilities to safeguard its interests, the capability to project hard power and political signalling.

Each service has its own SOF which has grown over the years. These are service specific and more often than not, there is competition and conflict of interests, rather than cooperation and coordination, be it their roles and tasks, equipping, training and command and

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control. Existing SOF of the armed forces include nine Parachute (Special Forces) battalions and five parachute battalions of the army, an 800-strong Marine Commando Force (MARCOS) organised on the concept of the US Marine SEALs and a 1,000 strong Indian Air Force (IAF) Garud.

The National Security Guard (SAG) and the Special Group manned and led by the army for internal security and hostage rescue are under the ministry of home affairs (MHA). These are elite forces, where every man is a volunteer, highly-trained and motivated. This force is among the most battle-hardened and combat-rich, equal to, if not better than, the best in the world.

The SOF is both force multipliers and substitutes. These forces provide the

theatre commanders with a low cost option to target high value military objectives in depth areas, thus giving the much needed strategic and operational reach during war. At present, SOF are assigned missions at the strategic, theatre and operational level and tasked to execute direct action, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance tasks during war to delay, disrupt and destroy high value targets in depth areas. During peace they are mandated to execute counter terrorist (CT) and counter insurgency (CI) operations, special reconnaissance, hostage rescue, capability building of friendly foreign countries (FFC), and above all, training for war.

There is a plethora of security forces (SF) in the Indian security context. Without debating on the quality and requirement of the over two dozen self-styled and self-proclaimed SF ranging from the state police and the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), the focus of this article will remain on the SOF of the armed forces.

The air force has enhanced its lift capability with the induction of the C-130J Hercules and C-17 Globe Master in addition to the already in service IL-76 and AN-32 aircrafts, thus giving the country the requisite reach to effectively intervene and safeguard our national interests in the regional and global context. The Indian Navy, too, is in the process of acquiring four landing craft/multi

role support vessels at a cost of USD 2.6 billion and nine Japanese ShinMaywa US2 amphibious aircraft, to upgrade the maritime lift capability for SOF and amphibious operations. To fully exploit this credible lift capability, the strategic reach and a battle-hardened, combat rich elite SOF, there is an urgent need to have integrated structures to effectively safeguard our national interests as mandated.

In 2012, the Naresh Chandra Task Force recommended creation of a Special Operations Command (SOC), Cyber and Space Commands. With the Narendra Modi-led NDA government demonstrating an urgency and resolve to address national security concerns, it is hoped that the three commands, as recommended will be finally sanctioned. Defence minister Manohar Parrikar, in a recent interview to a TV channel, has committed to pushing for a long overdue Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). This will pave the way for an effective command and control structure and the much needed jointness and synergy.

However, the key question is: Is India as a nation and the armed forces fully exploiting the potential of our SOF?

A clear and concise answer is: No.

There are three major reasons for this conclusion: The major weakness is the lack of a lean and mean, agile and versatile joint force under a single commander. This can be achieved by reorganising part of the SOF under the SOC. The SOC should be structured and organised as a truly integrated tri-service command under the CDS with integral lift capabilities. The roles assigned to the SOC in pursuance of the national security objectives would be power projection and intervention to safeguard our national interests and assets in the region, assistance to friendly foreign countries, albeit on invitation, and augment the war effort.

The tasks assigned to SOC during war should be to secure/ destroy high value targets in strategic and operational depth in furtherance of national military objectives. During peace, or rather 'no war no peace', the SOC will be the first responder to any emerging or impending threat to our national interest in the region.

The scenarios for its employment could include hostage rescue of Indian nationals and diplomats, evacuation of Indian nationals, providing reinforcement or assisting in evacuation of United Nations Peacekeeping Missions, assisting FFC from threats by inimical

elements within, albeit on invitation, assisting in HADR missions in the region and beyond and capacity building of armies of FFC. The SOC should also be responsible for development of SOF doctrine and training. Given the envisaged roles and tasks, the SOC should have a direct access to the national decision making body (CCS) in times of crisis.

An accompanying table gives a suggested outline organisation of SOC. In this model, the SOF have only certain essential elements placed under the direct command of the SOC, while the services continue to retain a major portion of the SOF for the theatre battle and internal security. However, there is a need to have inbuilt flexibility for the SOC to take under command additional SOF when required. It goes without saying that joint training during peace is a prerequisite.

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Secondly, the constant and continuous employment of SOF in CT and CI operations is a major detractor. The need for live situation training and combat experience aside, the focus on CT operations is detrimental to the combat edge, attitude and training required for the primary tasks in war. In effect, on account of the award and reward system of the armed forces, CT operations are the preferred deployment for the Para and Para (SF) battalions, the Garud, MARCOS and the Special Group. These tasks adversely impact the focus, training, preparation and planning for war. The SOF should be sparingly employed in CT operations and that too for specific high risk critical missions. The Services should, at the same time, incorporate systems to compensate the SOF cadres in their career progression.

Another major area which needs to be urgently addressed is making up critical equipment voids. SOFs are woefully short of equipment with critical deficiencies in firepower, communications, surveillance, insertion capabilities and

mobility. The SOF requirement is of low population, high technology arms and equipment. Yet, the procedure to procure equipment for SOF is the same as for all other arms and equipment as per the Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2013. This has obviously resulted in near zero procurement.

Indigenous development of high technology equipment is not attractive enough for Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) due to the limited quantities required. In any case, the inordinate delays in development by DRDO, leave the services with little option other than imports. It has been over two decades since the army has been trying to procure essential arms and equipment for the SOF, like combat free fall parachutes, small arms, sniper rifles, light strike vehicles, underwater diving equipment, communication equipment, laser target designators, heavy drop equipment and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs).

These still remain in various stages of procurement or development. Even low technology equipment like Parachute Jump Boots and Airborne Helmets being indigenously developed continue to be in the development and trial stages for over two decades.

The criticality has been compounded with the raising of additional parachute and parachute (SF) units. The envisaged procurements have not kept pace, leading to the existing inventory being rationalised, in effect the poverty has been shared. A proposal to fast-track procurements by empowering a special committee, similar to the special clothing and equipment committee for Siachen, has been under consideration with the government for over three years now.

It is difficult to comprehend as to how the MHA succeeds in procuring state-of-the-art weapons for the CAPF, wherein the MoD succeeds only in delaying all procurements, even of similar weapons which are in service with the CAPF. It is hoped that this will get corrected by the impetus to modernisation and priority in making up critical voids accorded by the defence minister.

The creation of a SOC is a strategic imperative as India embarks on the road to be a responsible and risen regional power. ■

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