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Issue Brief

Indian Special Forces Operations since 2014: Key Inferences

D.S. Murugan Yadav

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Summary

India's response to the terrorist attacks in Manipur and in J&K reflect a proactive response to tackle terrorist threats across borders and a perceptible shift in India's approach to major acts of terrorism. India's employment of MARCOS to protect its assets and those of other countries reinforces India's role as a reliable and responsible security provider.

Indian Special Forces (SF) have a long and illustrious history of employment both during conventional and sub-conventional operations. The deployment of Marine Commando Force (MARCOS) of the Indian Navy in the Gulf of Aden in light of the Red Sea crisis is the latest in the series of operations conducted by the Indian SF in the last decade. The recent years have witnessed a shift in their employment philosophy in pursuit of strategic objectives. The Brief outlines the roles and types of SF and highlights key inferences flowing from their employment in specific case studies of the past decade.

Definitions

The 2017 US Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms notes that SF are

> Active and Reserve Component forces of the Military Services designated and specifically organized, trained, and equipped to conduct and support special operations.[1]

The Indian Army Doctrine notes that

> The Special Forces are specially selected troops who are trained, equipped and organised to operate in hostile territory, isolated from the main combat force.[2]

It further states that the SF have the capability to operate independently or in support of the conventional forces at the operational level.

Likewise, the US DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms defines Special Operations as:

> Operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk.[3]

Some of the key characteristics that could be derived based on these definitions are as follows:

1. SF are specially trained and equipped units.

2. They operate/engage in small units or are numerically inferior to the adversary.

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[1] Joint Chiefs of Staff Washington United States, **"SOF(JP 3-05) DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms"**, Joint Publication 1-02, US Department of Defense, March 2017.

[2] Indian Army Doctrine–PART II, Headquarters Army Training Command, India, 2009.

[3] Joint Chiefs of Staff Washington United States, **"SOF(JP 3-05) DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms"**, no. 1.

3. They are specially organised for handling a specific situation.

4. They generally operate in hostile territory.

SF in Indian Context

In India, SF or Commandos (Cdo) have different roles and responsibilities based on their affiliated organisation. Some of the major SFs in India are listed below for reference.

Indian Armed Forces	Indian Army	Para SF (Special Forces) Battalions
		31 RR (Cdo) of the Rashtriya Rifles (RR)
		The Ghatak Platoons
	Indian Air Force	Garud Commando Force (GCF), in the same way as the GARUDS
	Indian Navy	Marine Commando Force (MCF), also known as the MARCOS
Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs)	Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF)	COBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action)
	National Security Guard (NSG)	51 Special Action Group (SAG)
		52 Special Action Group (SAG)
State Police Forces	Force One, the Mumbai Police	
	Special Operations Group (SOG), Jammu & Kashmir Police	
	Octopus Commandos, Telangana Police	
	Special Task Force (STF), Tamil Nadu Police	
	Thunder Bolt Commandos, Kerala Police	
	SWAT team, Punjab Police	

Source: By Author from Open Source Media Reports

SF Roles

The SF plays a significant role in India's military operations. The Indian Army doctrine specifies the concept of employment of Special Forces. It states that the SF

are valuable for the conventional forces, especially during the early stages of the campaign as they have the potential to shape the environment for further decisive operations. Hence, the SF enjoys the maximum possible intelligence support and maintain absolute operational secrecy. SFs are also mandated to develop and maintain an area of specialisation for their intended operational theatres for realising optimum effects. The SFs are a force multiplier and their operations are high-risk and high-gain missions having minimum visibility with desired effect.[4]

The Indian Army Doctrine and Joint Doctrine for Special Forces Operations (JP-5), HQIDS, 2008 envisages a key role for SFs across the theatre of conflicts such as tactical, operational and strategic, based on its activities and operational capabilities. Their roles can be broadly classified into three categories:

A. **Counter Terrorism (CT)**: The SF are predominantly employed to carry out actions to thwart terror threats and engage in CT operations to neutralise the terrorists. They have been deployed in Jammu & Kashmir and the North East.

B. **Conventional Role**: The role of SF at the conventional level entails carrying out:

1. Direct Action (DA) raids or in other words, strikes and offensive actions to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets.

2. Special Reconnaissance (SR) or tactical and strategic surveillance of vital targets.

3. Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2AD).

4. Suppression of Enemy Air Defence/Destruction of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD/DEAD); Denying strategic or operational assets and terminal targeting by precision munitions.

5. In Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC), they can conduct missions involving search and destroy and cross-border operations.

6. Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR): The SF engage in carrying out search and rescue missions both during war time and peacetime.

7. Apart from these, they also assist or conduct hostage rescue and assistance to friendly foreign governments during peacetime.[5]

C. **Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR)**: The SF support conventional forces in conducting HADR missions.

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[4] Indian Army Doctrine–PART II, no. 2.

[5] Ibid.

Recent SF Operations and Key Inferences

Analysts have noted that historically, the SF in India have mainly been employed at the tactical level, be it in the 1971 War, Op Pawan (Sri Lanka), Op Vijay (Kargil) and Counter Terrorism (CT)/Counter Insurgency (CI) operations in Jammu & Kashmir and North East.[6] The following sections highlight recent operations of the SF and some key inferences flowing out of these operations.

Operation Hot Pursuit, Myanmar, 2015

On 4 June 2015, in Motluk village of Chandel district in Manipur, a convoy of five vehicles carrying 46 soldiers of the 6 Dogra Regiment of the Indian Army, who were moving from their Battalion Headquarters (Bn HQ), Motluk to Imphal, were caught in an armed ambush by the Naga insurgents of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) (NSCN)(K). In the attack, 18 soldiers lost their lives and several others were severely wounded. This attack was claimed by the United Liberation Front of Western South East Asia (UNLFW) and is considered one of the deadliest attacks on the Indian Army in the North East since 1988. The insurgents used assault rifles and Rocket-Propelled Grenades (RPGs).[7]

On 9 June 2015, in response to the ambush, based on credible intelligence inputs on the insurgents, the Indian Army conducted a cross-border raid and a counter-insurgency (COIN) operation, codenamed 'Operation Hot Pursuit' along the India–Myanmar Border by employing 70 commandos of the 21 PARA SF against the training facilities and camps of the NSCN (K).[8] The operational plan was to cross the border, search and identify the insurgent camps that were located deep in the jungle of Myanmar and neutralise the insurgents. The entire operation went on for about 40 minutes and ended with neutralising insurgents and leaving others with severe injuries. This operation is perceived to be the starting point of a paradigm shift in India's more assertive posture from a restraint posture.[9]

Surgical Strike, Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), 2016

On 18 September 2016, the Army camp of the 12 Infantry Brigade Headquarters (Bde HQ) in Uri, Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir, came under a well-planned, Fidayeen-style attack by four heavily armed JeM terrorists. In the deadly attack, 19

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[6] Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, **"Exploiting Special Operation Forces-Beyond The Surgical Strikes"**, Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, 1 October 2017; Maj Gen AK Dhingra, **"Special Operations - A Capability Roadmap for India"**, Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, August 2021, p. 194.

[7] **"Case No. RC-03/2015/NIA-GUW"**, National Investigation Agency, 19 December 2015.

[8] Brig Rumel Dahiya, **"Ensuring Peace in the Northeast"**, Policy Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 11 June 2015.

[9] **"Raksha Rajya Mantri Shri Ajay Bhatt Unveils a Bust of India's First CDS Late Gen Bipin Rawat in New Delhi to Commemorate His First Death Anniversary"**, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 10 December 2022.

soldiers lost their lives. All the four terrorists were eliminated by the army.[10] On 29 September 2016, in response to the Uri attack, the Indian Army carried out a surgical strike against the terrorist launch-pads of JeM by crossing the Line of Control (LoC) and neutralising their facilities across seven different locations across Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).[11]

This surgical strike was a cross-border raid carried out by the 9 PARA SF and 4 PARA SF of the Indian Army against the JeM.[12] The operational plan was to foil the pre-empt infiltration of terrorists from the PoK. The PARA SF team was further divided into five small units for multiple targeting.[13] The operation was also supported by the Ghatak Platoons.[14] The surgical strike was a demonstration of a robust retaliation to the proxy war by Pakistan. It epitomised India's shift towards a muscular CT strategy of retaliation. India's actions were acknowledged as an acceptable expression of self-defence against terrorist groups.[15] The strike received widespread domestic support and helped raise the morale of the soldiers.[16] Furthermore, Lt Gen Bhatia (Retd) highlights that the terrorist attack in Uri questioned the strategic patience of India and pushed the nation to switch its CT strategy. He also adds that the 2016 surgical strike on the terrorist launch-pads by the PARA SF demonstrated India's strategic resolve.[17]

Anti-Piracy Operations by MARCOS in the Red Sea

Against the backdrop of the Israel–Hamas War, the Houthis have targeted merchant vessels associated with Israel and its supporters in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. In response to the rising incidents of maritime security in the region, the Indian Navy has deployed its naval vessels and its air assets to secure the sea lanes of communication by thwarting the threats posed by the non-state actors through conducting routine checks, Visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations.[18]

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[10] "**Defence Minister and Army Chief visit Kashmir**", Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 18 September 2016.

[11] "**Transcript of Joint Briefing by MEA and MoD (September 29, 2016)**", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 29 September 2016.

[12] Rakesh Sood, "**After the 'Surgical Strikes' – What Next?**", Observer Research Foundation, 4 October 2016.

[13] Vivek Chadha, Rumel Dahiya, Neha Kohli and Shruti Pandalai, "**Uri, Surgical Strikes and International Reactions**", Issue Brief, MP-IDSA, 4 October 2016.

[14] "**Armed or Unarmed, Indian Army Ghatak Commandos Will Be Ready for China**", *THE WEEK Magazine*, 29 June 2022.

[15] Vivek Chadha, Rumel Dahiya, Neha Kohli and Shruti Pandalai, "**Uri, Surgical Strikes and International Reactions**", no. 13.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, "**Changing Pakistan's Behaviour: India's Options**", Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, February 2020, p. 3.

[18] "**Indian Navy Enhances Surveillance in North / Central Arabian Sea And Gulf of Aden**", Indian Navy, 31 December 2023.

On 14 December 2023, off the coast of Somalia, MV Ruen, a Malta-flagged vessel was hijacked. On 23 December 2023, MV Chem Pluto, a Liberia-flagged merchant vessel came under a drone attack. Similarly, on the night of 4 January 2024, MV Lila Norfolk, a Liberian-flagged vessel came under a piracy attack.[19] The Indian Navy swiftly responded to the situation by directing its air assets and naval ships to action. The Marine Commandos were instrumental in securing the hijacked vessels and in further sanitisation/neutralisation of the threats. The Indian Navy in addition has deployed a dedicated task group that includes destroyers and frigates to conduct maritime security operations (MSO).[20]

These maritime piracy incidents also highlight a shift in maritime incidents closer to India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The IN efforts to ensure security and safety to the sea lanes of communication and international shipping vessels reiterates India's position as a net security provider in the region.[21] The MARCOS are instrumental in securing the crew of the ships and thwarting piracy by conducting VBSS operations, anti-piracy and maritime counter-terrorism (MCT) operations.[22]

Key Inferences

India's response to the terrorist attack in Manipur and thereafter in J&K reflects a proactive response across borders. Both these case studies highlight the perceptible shift in India's approach to major acts of terrorism. These were responses aimed at Pakistan and North East insurgent groups that India will retaliate by employing appropriate resources against terrorist bases across borders.

India's employment of MARCOS to protect its assets and those of other countries reinforces India's role as a reliable and responsible security provider. These military actions also reflect an integral aspect of India's foreign policy. It reinforces India's status as a benign actor working for the wider interests of the international community. Furthermore, it also resonates with India's policy of zero tolerance towards terrorism in all its manifestations.

The use of SF by India is a reflection of its growing capabilities and perceptible maturity in the handling of complex operations which not only involve security forces but also the use of other elements of India's national power. The creation of the Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD) in 2019 is a significant indication of the efforts to achieve synergistic joint capabilities. The trends indicate a further enhancement of India's SF capability and growing likelihood of its employment as an instrument of state policy.

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[19] **"INS Sharda, Deployed for Anti-Piracy Mission in the Region"**, Indian Navy.

[20] Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, **"Indian Navy Commandos Take Control of Pirate Ship in Airborne Raid"**, USNI News, US Navy, 18 March 2024.

[21] Harsh V. Pant and Kartik Bommakanti, **"Dynamic Shift: Indian Navy in The Red Sea"**, Observer Research Foundation, 7 February 2024.

[22] Captain KS Vikramaditya, **"The Red Sea Conundrum"**, National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, 17 January 2024.

About the Author

Mr. DS Murugan Yadav is Research Intern at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

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