

Special Forces

Do we need a Unified Tri-service Command?

CLAWS RESEARCH TEAM

India has very competent and capable Special Forces (SF) which have proved their mettle in various operations. Besides operating in various parts of the country, the SF have distinguished themselves while operating beyond the geographical confines of the country. 'Operation Pawan' in Sri Lanka, 'Operation Cactus' in Maldives, 'Operation Khukri' in Sierra Leone and deployment in various United Nations peace keeping forces are a testimony to the prowess of India's SF. This article aims to analyse the command and control set up of the Special Forces¹ of the Army, Navy and Air Force. The Indian Army has seven Special Forces (SF) and three airborne battalions,² the Indian Navy has marine commando (MARCOS) with approximately seven hundred personnel,³ and the Indian Air Force has Garuds consisting of approximately 1500 personnel.⁴ Three to four additional SF battalions are likely to be raised in the next five years.

Present Command and Control set up of India's Special Forces

Presently all Special Forces are under their parent service. One SF battalion is normally allotted to each theatre command of the Army. Subunits may be sub-allotted to Corps/Divisions for operations only. The overall operational control and deployment however rests with the Military Operations (MO) Directorate of the Indian Army. The Garuds and MARCOS are centrally controlled by the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy, respectively.

Global Trends

The United States Army Special Forces are popularly referred to as 'Green Berets'. The command and control over them is exercised by the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) which is a Unified Combatant Command charged with overseeing the various Special Operations Commands (SOC or SOCOM) of the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps . The command is part of the Department of Defense⁵.

The UK Special Forces consists of Special Air Service (SAS) and Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR) of the British Army and Special Boat Service (SBS) of the Royal Navy. The SAS consists of the 21, 22 and 23 Regiments. The British Special Forces are controlled by the United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF), a unified command under UK Ministry of Defence. UKSF is commanded by Director Special Forces (DSF), a Major General.⁶

In France, the Special Forces operate under Special Operations Command which is a joint service unit of the special operations forces of the three armed services. The French Army's Special Forces include 1st Marine Parachute Infantry Regiment which is the French equivalent of the US Army's Special Forces, or British SAS. It is complemented by French Army Light Aviation Special Operations Aviation Detachment with Puma and Cougar transport helicopters and Eurocopter Tiger gunship. The Air Force complement includes Special Operations Division, a fixed wing special operations aviation unit using C-160 Transall transport aircraft. The French Army Special Forces also consist of special helicopter squadron with Puma transport, and Puma gunship helicopters along with Commando Parachute Group No. 10. Naval Rifle Commandos form part of naval complement of French Special Forces.⁷

German Special Forces are referred as German Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK) who operate under the KSK Kommando Spezialkräfte (*Special Forces Command, KSK*).The command is composed of the ranks of Bundeswehr (Federal Defence Force) and organised as Special Operations Division, DSO. Bundeswehr consists of the unified armed forces of Germany and their civil administration and procurement authorities.

Russian Special Forces are popularly referred to as Spetsnaz GRU. The Russian Special Forces are controlled by the GRU, the foreign military intelligence directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

Possible Future Roles for Indian SF

Changed geo political and strategic environment in Indian sub continent is likely to witness even wider canvass of roles for India's SF. Some of the roles which could be assigned to the SF are:

- Unconventional and sub-conventional warfare (Counter Insurgency and proxy wars).
- Strategic reconnaissance.
- Intelligence gathering.
- Special covert operations in peace and overt operations in war.
- Counter terrorist (CT) and hostage rescue operations.
- Combat search and rescue (CSAR).
- "Social warfare" missions in "peacetime" as well as in war.
- Protection of important vulnerable areas/points.
- Disaster relief

Recommended optimal Command and Control

SF have a specific role to play; worldwide such forces have been placed under unified command to optimise resources and achieve operational synergy. There is a need for similar command structures to be created in the Indian context. It would be appropriate to examine the creation of a Unified Special Forces Command (USFC) which would exercise operational control over the SF of all three services. This tri-service command could be placed under HQ Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and later could come under the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), as and when the CDS is approved by the Government. It is recommended that this USFC be commanded by a three-star ranked officer and be staffed with a mix from all three services and also civil staff. The USFC should have its integral planning and intelligence staff from all three services and should also have support staff from civil intelligence agencies integral to it. The USFC should also be self contained to move up to three battalions by road at any time. Provisions to move the Force by air or sea must also be factored into the organisation. This would give the Force the requisite mobility and operational flexibility to operate wherever it is required to do so.

Notes

1. National Security Guard (NSG), Special Protection Group (SPG) and Special Frontier Force (SFF), may also be considered Special Forces with different charter of roles/ duties. This grouping in the above set up has not been considered.

2. The information on Special Forces remains classified .However; an attempt has been made to quantify their growing size and role using information available at www.specwarnet.net, indiannavy.nic.in and Garud Commando Force on Bharat Rakshak and Rediff.com, 6 February 2004.
3. American Heroes in Special Operations, Oliver North and Chuck Holton ,pp. 63 -67 accessed through www.socom.mil/
4. www.eliteukforces.info/(British Special Forces & Elite Units),p.3 accessed on 7th October, 2011.
5. Commandos and Special Operations Discussion Board in the SpecWarNet.net and available at <http://www.strategypage.com/militaryforums/516-2159.aspx> accessed on 7th October, 2011.
6. Strikehold.wordpress.com/2010/08/German-special-forces accessed on 3rd October, 2011 through <http://www.strategypage.com/militaryforums>
7. Commandos and Special Operations Discussion Board, *SpecWarNet*, available at <http://www.strategypage.com/militaryforums/516-2159.aspx> (accessed on 10 August 2011).