

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES (CLAWS)

Seminar on

AN EYE FOR AN EYE: SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND IRREGULAR WARFARE

17 December 2013

Introduction

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) organised a seminar on Special Operations and Irregular Warfare on 17 December at the CLAWS Seminar Hall, based on two years of research carried out by Dr Prem Mahadevan, Senior Researcher, Center for Security Studies, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, for writing a monograph on the subject for CLAWS. The discussants were Brig Deepak Sinha (Retd) and Mr Saikat Datta. Lt Gen PC Katoch (Retd) chaired the session. The seminar was well attended by serving officers and veterans of the Indian Armed Forces, members of the strategic community and CLAWS faculty.

Introductory Remarks: Lt Gen PC Katoch, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd)

Threats to India are actually going to increase. Because the US is pulling out from Afghanistan and there is evidence now that Pakistan is training mujahidin irregulars and mating them with regulars to create chaos in Afghanistan and India. This is the strategic depth that Pakistan is looking at. Robert Kaplan in his book *Revenge of Geography* explains what this strategic depth is and how it will give the ISI capability to increase radical hatcheries to treat India in the manner Hezbollah treats Israel. The threat is going to be for the whole world and not India alone.

Irregular war is nothing new; it has defeated US in Vietnam, Soviets in Afghanistan and the Americans in Afghanistan no matter how much they deny it. Big powers have started using proxies in irregular warfare in conflicts. China and Pakistan have advanced their asymmetric warfare capabilities, which they are using proactively while for some reasons India is lagging behind. This is a major problem area for India and is perhaps happening because India is looking at the employment of the Special Forces for short distance, direct type of action, while the task has gone much beyond that scope. India has to fight this war on its own.

An Eye For An Eye: Special Operations and Irregular Warfare: Dr. Prem Mahadevan, Senior Researcher, Center for Security Studies, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology.

The scope of study is limited to special operations and irregular warfare to counter terrorism in the Indian context. Special operations are strategically decisive when used offensively. There is need for airpower-independent human intelligence-based special operations. Special operations are defined as time-sensitive missions undertaken by select personnel as a team in an area dominated by enemy for the purpose of neutralising a critical target or a political asset. Each such operation is unique. These are best employed as offensive strategy and their importance mirrors terrorists' own use of special operations. Hezbollah was the first terrorist group to adopt this philosophy in Lebanon. Al Qaeda later on copied this concept from the Hezbollah employing special operations for the purpose of perception management.

The thought process in many militaries is that special operations are good for irregular warfare because they are optimised for small unit tactics. According to a RAND study, such operations against a terrorist base are more likely to succeed than the other way round. There are two distinct models of Special operations usage since World War II. While one has gained prominence, the other has faded away. The British model was dominated by units like SAS and was conceived as a morale booster. In the German model the military was much more effective in degrading enemy capabilities. The role played by special operations in irregular warfare has been of three kinds- area denial, area dominance and area penetration.

Terrorists viewed the US as a soft target, with little retaliation capability because intelligence is difficult to obtain, success rate is very low, and there is only a five percent chance of recruiting an agent even by professional recruiters. Passive counterterrorism by the terrorists increases the risk. There is also a credibility problem, as inputs collected by the Special Forces during raids can be labeled as planted by the intelligence analysts. When operating in hostile territory, commando teams have to be small. The US Army Intelligence Support Academy (ISA) can be studied by the Indian Army. It was created in 1981 as a mission impossible unit, to gather intelligence where no other agency can go. It has strong signal intelligence component and a direct action capability.

Western Special Forces depend very heavily on air power, which is both an asset and a liability. In such operations, aircrafts become the centre of gravity. Once they are hit, the forces become vulnerable as in the Mogadishu operations.

The German model of logistics is more relevant for India. Believing in "audacity is the key to success" it depends on innovation and use of disguise. One example is the Mussolini rescue mission of 1943. There are no tactical objectives to justify the use of airpower politically. India faces a big problem of detection by Arab, US and Chinese intelligence agencies. Specialised aircraft and highly trained pilots required for these

missions are not possessed by India unlike the US. India also does not have airpower superiority.

Training a commando is costly. It takes millions of dollars for training a single Navy SEAL. The operational fatality rate is 22% higher than other units and is 46% when training accidents are included.

The two models are different in terms of the qualities stressed. The British model stresses on strength and has led to the growth of physically strong but socially awkward soldiers. The Germans emphasise skill which led to their personnel being brilliant infiltrators in World War II.

Pakistan practices a concept of 'layered deniability'. In case of attack on the Indian territory, it first says that is because of a problem indigenous to India. It blames non-state actors and not the ISI in case cross-border terrorism is proved. If further evidence is given, they blame it on rogue officials of the ISI. This compartmentalisation creates the kind of confusion desired by the ISI. Pakistani attacks occur on a pattern- one major attack every six to eight years.

India should learn from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan where the Special Forces were underused and the Arab-Israeli conflict where they were overused. Indian use of Special Forces should be tactically defensive and strategically offensive. The narratives of the Pakistan Army, ISI and LeT should be studied, their blind spots identified and targeted. There should be a SWAT grid and a legal case for hitting back should be built up. The JuD and LeT infrastructure should be hit with ISI and SSG facilities being kept in reserve. The question that the families of the cadres should be hit or not should be addressed. The SPEC OPS mission should be self-contained and should not lead to military escalation. They should be airpower independent and the tasking should be done at the highest level of the government. With Pakistan, war should be fought covertly while peace should be talked overtly.

First Discussant: Mr. Saikat Datta, Editor (National Security), Hindustan Times

Special Forces are not created for a particular context - they should be able to work across the spectrum of capabilities and scenarios. There should be no Pak-centricity. There are many lessons to be learnt from British models like the SAS. US Special Forces were not created because of lobbying. The context is also defined by nuclear/non-nuclear status of the neighbour. Model for India, therefore, depends on these considerations. China should also be looked at. India can exploit the fact that Pakistan has used asymmetric warfare against India because of lack of strategic depth, and thus India should hurt Pakistan elsewhere like in Afghanistan. The NSA should not be taken as the highest decision making body for such operations, as he is a political

non-entity. The Cabinet Committee on Security has the requisite say and the maturity. The Indian Special Forces have suffered due to decisions made in the past decade.

Second Discussant: Brig Deepak Sinha (Retd), Consultant, Observer Research Foundation.

Definition of irregular warfare given is very restrictive, as it does not incorporate insurgencies. Insurgencies and terrorism today are also linked to criminal elements. In a concept paper in 2010, the US Department of Defence stated that irregular warfare is waged by an adaptive adversary pressing such threats which may not be countered by the military means alone. Insurgency, counterterrorism and guerrilla warfare are different issues and should not be seen as one. Terrorism can be dealt with by using counterterrorism methods and insurgency requires a political solution. Indian Special Forces have been correctly criticised as a super infantry involved in tactical missions. The difference between covert and clandestine operations is that while the former are completely deniable and non-attributed to the state, the latter are secretly conducted and the fact that they can be brought back to the state is not important. ISA is meant for clandestine and not covert operations. In UK, MI 6 and MI 5 are responsible for covert operations. The Western model for Special Forces is meant for clandestine operations.

In India, forces like these are required but should be handled by R&AW and not the army. The socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the Indian Army personnel make them unsuitable for going to other countries and carrying out operations of this nature. The third Geneva Convention of 1949 specifies what regular armed forces have to do and so providing a legal cover if serving personnel or regular units are used for such missions would be hard to come by. By and large, the Special Forces today meet the Indian requirements. A Tri Services Headquarters is required which should be patterned on the ISA.

Remarks by the Chair: Lt Gen PC Katoch, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SC (Retd)

Sub-conventional trans-border threats are being faced by India. China is using Maoists as proxies in India and Nepalese and Indian Maoists are interlinked. China has also masterminded the interlinking of Maoists with some other insurgent groups in the Northeast. Pakistan has its proxies in the Indian Mujahedeen and the Popular Front.

Interactive Session

- **India has a weak intelligence setup. There is inadequate intelligence of even activities within India especially in the central and north-eastern regions. Is there a case for employing journalists as spies?**

India definitely has a long way to go in developing a culture for intelligence-gathering. Force One raised in Maharashtra in 2010 post 26/11 attacks, though an elite force to counter terrorist strikes has not been employed/exposed for any worthwhile intelligence gathering/collation purposes within city and expects some other agency like the Mumbai Police to furnish actionable intelligence which reflects poorly on our planning and training models. Employing journalists as spies is against ethics of journalism and thus not recommended.

- **Special operations require specific intelligence. Which agency is expected to provide the same? Comment on the legality of such operations and the assumed non-escalation of hostilities from Pakistan side to special operations by India.**

Intelligence would be made available by central agencies like R&AW and IB. As regards legality issue, these should not be overriding and get in the way of operations. It is the operational aspect that is the most problematic. There is a sort of strategic paralysis on India when it comes to Pakistan.

- **Is “making war covertly” envisaged to be restricted to within Pakistan or outside? Will it be called special operations or irregular war?**

Hitting Pakistani interests outside Pakistan in countries say in the Middle East or Nepal would not be in India's interests because of international pressure and the likely damage to India's bilateral relations based on India's experiences in Sri Lanka. Therefore, India should look for areas close to the border like insurgent camps and other suitable targets.

Concluding Remarks: Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch, SM, VSM (Retd), Director, CLAWS

Military escalation if it were to occur should be controlled. There should be preparations for such an eventuality and an adequate response should be given. Legality is a very elastic word. It depends on who is fighting the case. Lawyers can fight the case from either side and prove it legal. Thus, India can do the same and win it too. LeT is not worth targeting. Instead, the political and military leadership of Pakistan should be targeted. Terrorists are dispensable to the Pakistan establishment (Army/ISI) and thus it doesn't matter to them as to how many are killed. Denting the Pak military's credibility will be a great service to their civil society in Pakistan as it can lead to a change in the internal dynamics of that country.