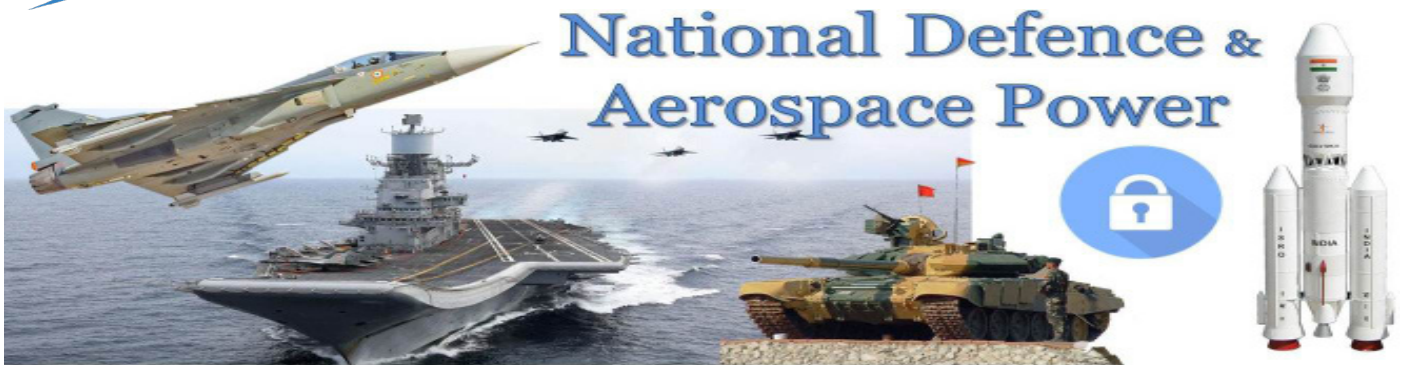




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JOINTNESS IN INDIA'S SPECIAL FORCES: ASSESSING STRUCTURAL AND DOCTRINAL READINESS

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Introduction

The Indian Armed Forces are approaching jointness to enhance their synergetic operational effectiveness. Some such steps include the creation of tri-service structures such as the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQ IDS), the Andaman and Nicobar Command, Strategic Forces Command, the Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD), and the Department of Military Affairs. Moreover, HQ IDS is mandated to achieve jointness in the desired domains to enhance the inter-agency interoperability. With such a mandate, it brings out guidance in the form of joint doctrines, and last year, it released unclassified versions of some joint doctrines,¹ one of which is the Joint Doctrine for Special Forces Operations.

Special Forces (SF) operations are conducted at the strategic and operational levels, to achieve national and military objectives in a hostile, denied, and politically sensitive Operational Environment (OE).² The SF is trained to carry out such operations that demand precision and have paralysing effects on the adversary.

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A Glance at Special Forces in India

The necessity of raising a specialised

commando force was felt in the Indian Army (IA) during the 1965 war with Pakistan, when an ad hoc 'Meghdoot Force' was raised.³ Following this war, India's first formal commando unit, i.e., 9th Commando Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, was raised on July 01, 1966.⁴ Next year, on June 01, 1967, it was split into two, and the 10th PARA Commando Battalion was raised, and the number of battalions has subsequently been raised to meet the requirements. The SF under the IA is focused on conducting land-based special operations (SOs).

Whereas the other two services, such as the Indian Navy (IN) and the Indian Air Force (IAF), have their own SF: the Marine Commando Force (MARCOS) and the Garuda Commando Force, respectively. The MARCOS, raised in 1987, are mandated to carry out specialised operations in the maritime environment, such as amphibious raids, anti-piracy operations, and sabotage of enemy ships.⁵ The IAF's Garuda, raised in 2004, is mandated for the protection of its critical assets, search and rescue operations, anti-hijacking, CI-CT (Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism) operations, etc.⁶

While the SF are divided into two segments, first, for fulfilling the service-specific requirements, and second, for strategic level joint SF ops, for which there is an integrated tri-service organisation 'Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD)'. It operates with SF elements from all three services to foster synergy and improve operational effectiveness in SOs.

There are other SF organisations like the National Security Guard (NSG) and the Special Frontier Force (SFF) under the command of other ministries, with NSG under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and SFF under the Cabinet Secretariat (CS).⁷ Though both these organisations are not detached from the military, as the NSG's Special Action Group (SAG) draws its manpower from the IA. The SFF has Tibetan nationals as Personnel Below Officer Rank (PBOR); however, they are trained and led by the IA at the tactical level. In both cases, higher command and control (C2) is not under the Ministry of Defence or the IA. This has led to C2 and interoperability issues as witnessed during 26/11. Experts highlight that the C2 of these two organisations should be kept under AFSOD for better operational effectiveness, making it easier to achieve interoperability and deployment to serve the purpose.

The Integration of SF in India

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limited segment of services available for extraordinary/demanding missions.⁸ In July 2011, the Naresh Chandra Task Force (NCTF) was set up, which submitted its report in 2012.⁹ It recommended a national-level special operations command to integrate the SF resources of all three services. The need for such an organisation surfaced on several occasions, including the 26/11 attack and Pathankot Air Base attack.¹⁰

Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD)

Following the recommendation of NCTF, AFSOD, under HQ IDS, was set up in November 2019. However, AFSOD is a division-sized organisation instead of a full-fledged command. It is mandated to plan, train, and execute the joint operations involving SFs, and also use them to supplement the overall war effort for attaining the strategic objective.¹¹ It has been conducting joint SF exercises such as ‘Smelling Field’ in Kutch (September 2019),¹² DANX-2019 in Andaman and Nicobar, and deployed in CI-CT operations in Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.¹³

It is worth noting that there are limitations of AFSOD,¹⁴ such as a minimal quantity of SF strength, as most of the quantity is retained by services, and it lacks supporting elements.¹⁵ Moreover, it has no independent capabilities for SOs, like generating and exploiting intelligence, organic aviation, and sustainable assets like intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, logistics, etc.¹⁶ Another key issue is that NSG and SFF are not kept under AFSOD, and, over time, experts have expressed concern about their C2 with MHA and CS, respectively.¹⁷ These irritants have hindered the operational effectiveness of AFSOD to the extent that it was needed.¹⁸ It suggests the need to establish a Special Operations Command (SOCOM) to achieve the desired results regarding Joint SF operational capability. AFSOD has certainly brought the required understanding, training modules, and some experiences, which will be utilised by the SOCOM or Armed Forces Special Operations Command (AFSOC) in the future. However, the concerned doctrine on joint SF Ops mentions that in future, the role of AFSOD can be expanded depending upon the requirements.¹⁹ Moreover, apart from its formation, certain steps are taken, such as the formulation of doctrines to facilitate guidance evolved from their experiences.

The Integration of SF Across the Globe

Some countries have had joint SF structures, such as the USA, China, and Russia, since 1987, 1988, and 2013, respectively.²⁰

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM)

Following the failure of *Operation Eagle Claw*, the USA enacted the *Goldwater-Nichols Act* in 1986 to establish joint theatre commands, and in 1987, it raised its SOCOM to carry out SFJOs. It has four component commands, each from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, and eight sub-unified commands, i.e., Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and seven Theatre Special Operations Commands (TSOCs).²¹ The service component commands are responsible for raising and sustaining. Whereas JSOC carryout a study of SO requirements, techniques, facilitating interoperability, standardisation of equipment, planning and conducting SO exercises, looking after training, and developing joint SO tactics.²² The operational control of TSOCs lies with the GCCs. In the comparison matrix conducted by Major Anand Nashikkar (as seen in Table 1), it is ranked first in terms of unified command effectiveness, ability to achieve national and theatre-level objectives, inter-service integration, and integral supporting elements.²³

The People's Liberation Army's Special Operations Forces (PLASOF)

China has raised Brigade-sized joint SOF units attached to each Integrated Theatre Command (ITC). Though China has no centralised C2 of SOF at the apex level, and they are controlled by theatre commanders for effective utilisation in supporting service-specific conventional forces, their suitability for national-level missions is limited.²⁴ Additionally, they have limited strategic support (as much available with a theatre), which binds them to taking high-demanding SOs.²⁵ In the comparison matrix carried out by *Major Nashikkar*, it is ranked third after the USSOCOM and KSO, respectively.²⁶

Russia's Komandovanie Sil Spetsialnykh Operatsiy (KSO)

Russia has established a national-level SOCOM, KSO. It draws manpower from the Russian military. The organogram as available in the public domain has five combat divisions (a total of five units) in their KSO, and three other divisions responsible for training, operational application, deployment, and evacuation.²⁷ KSO is a partially unified command, as the other SF components are held with Spetsnaz, much like the Indian Armed Forces have kept their SF component reserved for their usage. This has kept the ranking of KSO as second in comparison to the matrix, USSOCOM and PLASOF, first and third, respectively.

Table 1: Representation of Consolidated Matrix of SFOC Suitability for India

CRITERIA	USSOCOM	KSO	PLA SOF
Unified Command	Best	Better	Unsuitable
Achieve National and Theater Strategic Objectives	Best	Better	Good (PLA SOF brigades organization corresponds more with India's regional theater focus)
Inter-services Integration	Best	Good	Better
Integral Supporting Elements	Best	Better	Good
OVERALL ASSESSMENT	Best	Better	Good

Source: Anand Nashikkar, "Relevance and Functionality of Special Operations Command in India," Master's Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, June 10, 2022, p. 74.

Thereby, it suggests that amongst the Joint SF Structures in leading foreign militaries, the US version fits the best for Indian requirements with all the discussed tenets. Moreover, the joint structures play a pivotal role, but doctrinal guidance also remains a deciding factor in the organisation's overall operational efficiency.

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The Joint Doctrine for Special Forces Operations

As discussed, the three services have had their own SF, and kept their service-centric doctrines for their usage.²⁸ Therefore, a need was felt for a joint doctrine that provides joint guidance, principles, and strategies for SF across all three domains. It is worth noting that the joint doctrines, including the concerns, are not the first of their kind; their classified versions have been in place since the creation of HQ IDS. Like, a copy of Joint Doctrine for Special Forces Operations was also released in 2008.²⁹ These documents need revision after a gap to address the changing character of war, one of the reasons being the upgraded technological infusion in warfare. Subsequently, HQ IDS came up with the unclassified version of this doctrine last year.

It gives insights into the joint SF operations, imperatives, roles and missions, C2, planning, future contours, etc. The OE drawn for SF is either solo for smaller missions or in conjunction with conventional forces for strategic success.³⁰ It highlights that

SF's apprehension of strategic success is rare without the involvement of supporting elements. The best results in SOs are achieved when operations are planned and executed jointly with conventional forces. The roles for SF are mainly reconnaissance, surveillance, and target designation, engaging critical targets, launching offensive operations, and exploitation in unconventional/asymmetric warfare.³¹

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Mandate for Special Forces Joint Operations (SFJO)

The C2 of SFJO, in which at least two services are involved, is maintained at the highest level. The Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) is responsible for the overall conduct of SFJO, and it issues the Operational Directive (OD) to the concerned Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) for the conduct of SFJO.³² The OD involves the Mission Tasking Order (MTO), which is issued after target validation and identification of mission requirements. Post receipt of the MTO, the SF Commander derives mission objectives and works on target development, selection of appropriate forces for the mission, and lastly, mission planning. Meanwhile, AFSOD is mandated to coordinate the SFJO targets under COSC and is in an advisory role to the Chairman of COSC for employment and coordination of these operations.

Conclusion

A few details are sketchy and may be intentional, given the doctrine's unclassified nature. A few times, they are vague; throughout the document, there is no clear answer as to who is really mandated for SFJO. Who is the SF Commander, whether he is nominated by the COSC or the C-in-C of AFSOD, will play this role as per his mandate for the joint SF operations. Though this mandate is likely to be with AFSOC (once formed).

The second issue that remains unclear is which possible OE, in which AFSOD or SFs need to operate jointly. Thirdly, there is no mention of joint operations of AFSOD or any of the SF with NSG and SFF. During 26/11, MARCOS was also deployed till the arrival of NSG, and there can be such situations again in the present hybrid environment. Similarly, in events like *Operation Snow Leopard* (2020), the SFF can be deployed along with other SF and conventional forces. These details need to be infused with the next issue of the doctrine.

While India has made progress towards jointness in its SFs with AFSOD, its SFJOs capabilities remain limited due to the absence of an AFSOC/SOCOM. The concerned doctrine certainly facilitates interoperability through joint guidance and framework, though it has limitations such as a lack of clarity at times on aspects such as C2, OE, and interoperability with organisations like NSG and SFF. These demanding changes shall foster India's joint SF warfighting capabilities.

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Notes:

¹ Manish Kumar, “Fostering Joint Warfighting: India’s Joint Doctrine for Airborne and Heliborne Operations 2025,” Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), November 27, 2025, <https://idsa.in/publisher/issuebrief/fostering-joint-warfighting-indias-joint-doctrine-for-airborne-and-heliborne-operations-2025>. Accessed on May 10, 2026.

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vijay Oberoi, *Special Forces: Doctrine, Structures and Employment Across the Spectrum of Conflict in the Indian Context* (New Delhi: Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, Knowledge World, 2006), p. 33.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ K. D. Pathak, “Indian Special Forces: Growth, Organisational Changes, Current Structure, Concepts and Doctrine of Employment,” in Vijay Oberoi (Ed.), *Special Forces: Doctrine, Structures and Employment Across the Spectrum of Conflict in the Indian Context* (New Delhi: Centre for Joint Warfare Studies, Knowledge World, 2006), p. 192

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¹⁴ Nashikkar, n, 10, p. 22.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Nashikkar, n. 10, p. 12; Pathak, n. 8, p. 193.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹ Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff, n. 2, p. 63.

²⁰ Nashikkar, n. 10, pp. 55, 59, 63.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

²² Ibid., p. 27.

²³ Ibid., p. 74.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 72.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁸ Oberoi, n. 5, p. 25.

²⁹ Naval chief unveils joint doctrine for special forces Ops,” *OneIndia*, October 01, 2008. <https://www.oneindia.com/2008/09/30/naval-chief-unveils-joint-doctrine-for-special-forces-ops-1222842106.html>. Accessed on May 10, 2026.

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