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Integrating Special Operations Forces into India's Theatre Command Framework: Operational Challenges and Strategic Imperatives

Sunil Kumar Gadeock

CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam "Bahadur", was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw's contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier's soldier and a General's General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India's best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.



Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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Integrating Special Operations Forces into India's Theatre Command Framework: Operational Challenges and Strategic Imperatives

Abstract

The transformation of warfare in the 21st century has shifted the focus of military power from conventional force-on-force engagements to integrated, intelligence-driven, and multi-domain operations. India's evolving security environment—characterised by cross-border terrorism, hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and strategic competition from the China-Pakistan nexus—demands a more agile and coordinated military response. This paper examines how India can integrate its Special Operations Forces (SOF) into the evolving theatre command framework to address inter-service fragmentation, enhance intelligence fusion, and strengthen joint operational effectiveness. This paper argues that India's fragmented Special Forces structure limits operational effectiveness, intelligence integration, and rapid response in high-tempo conflict scenarios. Drawing on India's operational experience and international models such as the United States' special operations structure, the study analyses the institutional, organizational, and political challenges that hinder jointness,

including inter-service rivalry, bureaucratic fragmentation, and a lack of sustained strategic direction. The paper further argues for integrating intelligence architectures and fostering a unified operational culture to strengthen India's deterrence posture and multi-domain warfighting capability. The paper employs a qualitative analytical approach and a comparative assessment of India's SOF structures and the US Special Operations Command (USSCOM), identifying the institutional challenges and exploring options for a more integrated special operations architecture.

Introduction

The character of warfare in the 21st century has profoundly transformed, moving beyond the traditional paradigm of state-centric conventional military engagements toward multidimensional conflict characterized by information dominance, cognitive influence, and technological integration. Contemporary conflicts increasingly unfold across multiple domains, including cyber, space, information, economic, and psychological spheres, blurring the distinction between war and peace. In this evolving security environment, victory is no longer determined solely through territorial conquest or conventional battlefield superiority. It has become the factor that shapes perceptions, maneuvers information and scenarios, influences decision-making processes, and achieves strategic objectives through integrated applications of national power.

India's contemporary security environment reflects this changing nature of warfare. The country faces a complex spectrum of security challenges that extend beyond traditional interstate conflict, including cross-border terrorism, proxy warfare, insurgencies, hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and intensifying geopolitical competition within its immediate and extended neighbourhood. These threats are frequently characterised by

ambiguity, deniability, dispersion, and operations below the threshold of conventional warfare, thereby complicating traditional military responses. Consequently, addressing such challenges requires instruments of force that are accurate, scalable, adaptable, and capable of operating covertly across diverse operational environments.

Within this context, Special Operations Forces (SOF) emerged as a critical component of modern military strategy (Sinha & Balakrishnan, 2023). Their ability to conduct unconventional warfare, counterterrorism operations, strategic reconnaissance, direct action missions, and intelligence-driven operations makes them well suited to evolving contemporary conflict environments. However, despite their strategic significance, India's special operations capabilities remain constrained by fragmented command structures, inter-service rivalries, overlapping operational responsibilities, and limited jointness among military services. These structural limitations raise important questions regarding the optimisation of India's special operations architecture within the broader framework of modern warfare and national security strategy. In this context, this paper argues for integrating intelligence architectures and fostering a unified operational culture to strengthen India's deterrence posture and multi-domain warfighting capability. The paper examines integrating India's Special Operations Forces (SOF) into the evolving theatre command framework to assess inter-service fragmentation, enhance intelligence fusion, and improve joint operational effectiveness. Using a qualitative analytical approach and a comparative examination of India's SOF structures and the USSCOM, it analyses the institutional constraints on integration and considers options for developing a more cohesive special operations architecture.

Further, integrated theatre warfare should be understood not simply as the geographical consolidation of armed forces under one single commander, but as the combination of command, intelligence, logistics, communications, surveillance and specialised capabilities across domains. Jointness is the institutional and doctrinal foundation for such integration, while multi-domain operations characterise the operational manifestation of this integration through land, maritime, air, cyber, space and information domains. Within this, Special Operations Forces can act as strategic enablers rather than only being the tactical assault formations. Thus, India does not merely require more capable Special Forces; it also needs an institutional architecture that can translate their capabilities into strategic effects.

Changing Character of Warfare and Strategic Context

This change in the character of warfare in the 21st century reflects a transition from conventional conflicts towards multidimensional contests involving military, political, economic, technological, and informational instruments of power. Modern adversaries seek to exploit vulnerabilities below the threshold of conventional war, enabling them to pursue strategic objectives while minimising the risks associated with direct military confrontation. As early as 2001, Pakistani strategic thinking emphasised low-intensity conflict, irregular warfare, and proxy operations as effective alternatives to conventional military engagement, reflecting a deliberate shift toward asymmetric approaches (Deshpande, 2018).

For India, this evolving security landscape has created a complex and persistent threat environment. Increased cooperation between China and Pakistan across all sectors, including non-military ones, has emerged as a key factor shaping contemporary sub-conventional challenges faced by India (Singh & Singh, 2021).

Pakistan's sustained use of terrorist organisations and nonstate actors as instruments for creating sustained security pressures through cross-border terrorism, insurgencies, and covert operations (Yamin & Malik, 2014). At the same time, China's strategic, economic, and technological support to Pakistan has strengthened this partnership, contributing to a multidimensional security challenge that extends beyond territorial disputes (Ali, 2024). So, the theatre of conflict has expanded to include economic competition, maritime security, cyber vulnerabilities, information warfare, and influence operations. Shifting geopolitical priorities have often led external actors to respond selectively, reinforcing the need for India to develop autonomous security capabilities and strategic resilience (Rossow, 2025). India's responses to these evolving threats have often remained responsive to the actions and deeply rooted in conventional military frameworks. This reflects broader limitations within India's strategic culture and long-standing institutional preferences (Misra, 2015). The emerging complex security environment therefore requires more proactive, integrated, and flexible approaches that combine conventional deterrence with specialized capabilities, intelligence-driven operations, and enhanced employment of special operations forces within a comprehensive national security framework. India's institutional evolution demonstrates that jointness has developed incrementally rather than through a single comprehensive reform. Experiences of the Indian Armed Forces point towards a gradual shift from service-specific structures towards greater coordination, interoperability, and institutional integration (Mukherjee, 2017). The operational requirements of conventional conflicts, counterinsurgency operations, and emerging multidomain threats have gradually highlighted the limits of service-oriented planning and the need for mechanisms that can coordinate capabilities across the three services, i.e., the Army, Air Force, and Navy. Eventually, this has encouraged the establishment and strengthening of joint

institutions, mechanisms and doctrines proposed to improve coordination in planning, training, intelligence and operations (Bhattacharya, 2025).

The development of joint structures has also exhibited a connection to fill the gap in the organisational divide between the Army, Navy and Air Force. Institutions such as the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) and tri-service formations[1] provided important basis for joint planning and operational coordination. However, subsequent reforms have aimed to strengthen institutional mechanisms for integrated decision making. The appointment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and the creation of the Department of Military Affairs are some of the important steps towards consolidating responsibility for military integration and facilitating jointness amongst forces. The development of joint doctrines has also aimed to establish common conceptual and operational frameworks across the services.

Nonetheless, expanding joint institutions does not automatically translate into full operational integration. The integration of specialised operational capabilities, particularly Special Forces, intelligence organisations and emerging domain enablers, remains lacking. Diversity in organisational cultures,

[1] All three branches of Indian armed forces—the Army, Navy, and Air Force—combine troops, resources, and doctrines to establish integrated military structures, commands, or operating groups. It is known as tri-service formations. Coordinated land, sea, air, cyber, and space operations are carried out by these unified bodies. Strategic zones are jointly guarded by assets from all three services under a single commander in unified geographical commands like the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) of India, which is responsible for crucial marine routes. Some integrated units are designed not for regional defence but for specific strategic tasks. India's strategic nuclear capabilities are overseen by the Strategic Forces Command (SFC). Similarly, task forces with a focus on the aspects of modern warfare like cyber and space agencies, as well as the Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD) are for elite multi-service commando operations.

command relationships, training systems, technological architectures and operational priorities continues to constrain seamless integration (Bhattacharya, 2025). For instance, Special Forces can generate effects across multiple theatres and domains, but their service-related evolution has limited their use as a unified strategic instrument. Similarly, intelligence remains dispersed across various agencies and services, while cyber, space, unmanned systems and information capabilities are developing at varying levels of integration. As a result, India's next level of military reforms requires moving beyond the creation of joint institutions to a deeper integration of capabilities, command structures, intelligence and technology within a coherent theatre warfare framework.

Evolution of Special Forces in India

India's special forces have evolved gradually yet significantly in response to changing security threats and operational requirements. Since independence, India has faced a wide spectrum of security challenges, including conventional wars, insurgencies, terrorism, and maritime threats. These evolving threat perceptions necessitated the creation of highly specialised military units capable of conducting operations beyond the scope of conventional forces. Consequently, India established elite formations such as the Para Special Forces under the Army, the Marine Commandos (MARCOS) under the Navy, and the Garud Commando Force under the Air Force, each designed to fulfil service-specific operational roles and missions (Man Rai, 2005). While these units developed impressive capabilities and expertise within their respective domains, their evolution remained largely service-centric, limiting institutional integration and coordination. This fragmented approach constrained their ability to function as a unified strategic instrument capable of addressing complex and multidimensional security challenges (Man Rai, 2005).

Over the years, Indian Special Forces have demonstrated remarkable operational competence in a variety of missions, proving their value as critical instruments of national security. Their participation in high-profile operations such as Operation Black Tornado during the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, Operation Cactus in the Maldives in 1988, and the surgical strikes conducted across the Line of Control in 2016 highlighted their effectiveness in executing precise, time-sensitive, and strategically significant missions (Yadav, 2024). These operations showcased Special Forces' ability to respond rapidly, conduct precision strikes, and operate effectively in hostile environments. Furthermore, they underscored the importance of accurate intelligence, swift decision-making, and coordinated execution in achieving mission success. These operations reinforced the growing recognition of Special Forces as an indispensable component of India's military capabilities.

However, these successful missions also exposed certain structural and organisational limitations. The lack of a unified command framework often led to coordination challenges, duplicated efforts, and difficulty integrating intelligence and operational planning across services. As warfare increasingly shifts towards multi-domain operations involving land, air, sea, cyber, and space dimensions, the need for seamless coordination among specialised units has become more pronounced. Contemporary conflicts demand rapid information sharing, synchronised planning, and integrated execution, all of which are difficult to achieve under fragmented command structures. In this regard, international models, particularly the special operations framework adopted by the United States, demonstrate the advantages of unified command systems that facilitate interoperability, strategic planning, and efficient resource allocation (Black, 2022).

Comparison of United States Special Operations Command and India

The experience of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is pertinent for India as it provides a suitable institutional reference for analysing how specialised military capabilities can be integrated within a larger defence structure. USSOCOM was established in 1987, and it brought together the special operations capabilities of the US Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps under a unified command structure. The institutional systems that allow specialised forces to be coordinated across services—supported by focussed intelligence, logistical, training, communications, and acquisition structures—are especially important to India. The US experience presents a crucial question for India, where Special Forces assets are still divided among the Army, Navy, and Air Force and it could increase institutional integration to enhance interoperability and minimize duplication without removing service specific expertise. This comparison is pertinent to understanding the operational environment that India faces and requires capabilities that are beyond conventional limits. Counterterrorism, hostage rescue, reconnaissance, maritime special operations, strategic intelligence, precision operations and operations in difficult terrain can require the synchronised use of capabilities from multiple services and specialised agencies. In this context, USSOCOM offers India a reference point for analysis and assessing of whether Special Forces should be viewed primarily as individual service assets or as part of a broader joint operational architecture. The American model also signifies the importance of dedicated institutional support. It is to be kept in mind that the effectiveness of Special operations depends not only on elite personnel but also on intelligence fusion, specialised aviation, communications, surveillance, mobility, medical support and mission-specific acquisition (United States

Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, 2018).

However, directly replicating the American model would not be advantageous and could create challenges for India. *Firstly,* Indian Special Forces have developed within different service structures, operational traditions and command arrangements. Creating a genuinely integrated structure would require changes in authority, command relationships, and resource allocation. *Second, India's financial and technological resources are more constrained than those available to the United States, making it difficult to replicate the extensive support architecture associated with USSOCOM*. *Thirdly*, India's security environment is geographically and strategically distinctive, extending from high-altitude Himalayan terrain to the Indian Ocean and requiring different forms of specialisation. *Fourthly*, greater integration would require sustained joint training, common doctrines, interoperable communications and intelligence-sharing mechanisms. *Fifthly*, institutional reform may face resistance where established service responsibilities and organisational identities are perceived to be affected. So, the comparison with USSOCOM lies less in replication than in identifying institutional principles on which it successfully works such as joint command, specialised support, interoperability and dedicated resource structures, that can potentially be adapted to India's own strategic and organisational circumstances.

Against this backdrop, establishing a Joint Special Operations Command has emerged as a key requirement to enhance India's special operations capabilities. Persistent deficiencies in inter-service integration, coordination, and planning continue to limit the full operational potential of existing Special Forces units. Service-oriented doctrines and isolated planning mechanisms often hinder the development of a cohesive strategic approach to special operations (Kumar, 2025). Moreover, the growing importance of

emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, cyber capabilities, and advanced surveillance platforms necessitates a centralised mechanism for coordination and capability development. Uneven adoption of these technologies across services further strengthens the case for a unified command structure that can oversee integration, innovation, and operational synergy (Upadhyay, 2023). Such an arrangement would enhance preparedness for modern warfare and will enable India's Special Forces to operate as a truly integrated and strategic national asset.

Structural and Institutional Challenges

Despite the recognised strategic significance of an integrated special operations framework, its establishment continues to encounter institutional complexities, particularly in achieving larger interservice coordination and in securing sustained policy-level consensus necessary for its implementation. These challenges are deeply rooted in organisational structures, historical practices, and broader governance dynamics. Interservice rivalry remains one of the most persistent obstacles to jointness within the Indian Armed Forces. Each service has developed distinct operational doctrines, training regimes, and strategic priorities, which have eventually led to strong institutional identities. Despite this promoting professionalism, it has also led to competition for resources, influence, and operational control. This is particularly true of special forces, which are invariably regarded as elite assets that enhance each service's operational credibility. So, there is reluctance to centralise control under a joint command which can be perceived as diminishing of service specific authority (Chaudhary, 2022). This rivalry leads to duplication of capabilities, inefficiencies in resource utilisation, and delays in operational coordination. The absence of a truly integrated command structure means that joint operations often rely on ad hoc arrangements rather than institutionalised mechanisms. Furthermore, the lack of

"purple leadership" continues to hinder integration. Senior leadership tends to operate within service-specific paradigms, limiting the development of a unified operational culture (Decker, 2025).

Equally important is the challenge of political will, which represents perhaps the most decisive factor in determining the success or failure of defence reforms. While the need for jointness and integration is widely acknowledged, implementation of such reforms has remained limited. Political leadership has often been cautious about undertaking structural changes that could disrupt existing institutional balances or provoke resistance within the services and bureaucracy. One major issue is the absence of sustained political direction. In case of India, reforms have often been episodic rather than comprehensive, with initiatives such as the creation of the Chief of Defence Staff representing important but incomplete steps. Establishing an integrated special operations framework requires sustained political engagement to guide its development and overcome institutional resistance. (Kanwal & Kohli, 2018). Another aspect concerns threat and risk perception. Special operations essentially involve covert and high-risk missions, often with significant political implications. Policymakers must be willing to accept operational risks and potential fallout. In India's case, strategic caution due to concerns related to escalation and international repercussions, has limited the willingness to fully institutionalise such capabilities. The absence of a clearly articulated national security strategy further complicates this issue. Without a defined strategic framework, the role and employment of special operations remain ambiguous. This ambiguity leads to hesitancy in granting autonomy to a centralised command structure (Schottli, 2026). The historical separation between civilian and military institutions has resulted in limited integration and understanding of operational requirements. This often leads to

cautious, process driven decision making that prioritises bureaucratic control over operational effectiveness (Bommakanti et.al., 2023). Political considerations regarding inter-service balance further influence decision-making. Creating an integrated special operations framework would require redistributing authority and resources, demanding careful management of institutional sensitivities. Without decisive leadership, such concerns can delay reforms. Lastly, defence reforms must compete with broader governance priorities. Without immediate crises, structural reforms may not receive sustained attention, leading to reactive rather than proactive policy approaches (Bommakanti et al., 2023).

Enabling Capabilities and Operational Advantages

The effectiveness of an integrated special operations framework depends on enabling capabilities such as integrated training, unified doctrines, and advanced technological infrastructure. Operationally, a unified command would enhance India's counterterrorism, precision-strike, and strategic reconnaissance capabilities while strengthening deterrence. India's transition toward integrated theatre warfare requires sustained reforms to enhance jointness, intelligence integration, and inter-service coordination (Subramaniam, 2026). Strong political direction and institutional support are necessary to overcome organisational rivalries and bureaucratic fragmentation. Reforms should prioritise integrated doctrines, joint professional military education, interoperable communication systems, and unified planning mechanisms under the Chief of Defence Staff framework. The establishment of integrated special operations framework must be pursued through a phased and politically supported framework under the Chief of Defence Staff. Strong political leadership is essential to overcome inter-service rivalries and institutional resistance. Structural reforms must incentivise jointness through career progression, integrated training, and unified doctrines.

Global models show that unified command structures enhance operational responsiveness (Subramaniam, 2026). A hybrid model may offer the optimal balance between strategic concentration of specialised capabilities and theatre-level operational responsiveness. Such an arrangement would avoid the limitations of both complete centralisation and complete decentralisation. Under a fully centralised structure, Special Forces could benefit from unified doctrine, common training standards, specialised equipment, intelligence support and concentrated resource allocation. However, excessive centralisation could create operational distance from theatre commanders and introduce delays in responding to rapidly evolving contingencies. By contrast, assigning all Special Forces exclusively to individual theatre commands could improve local responsiveness but may reproduce the service-specific fragmentation that currently limits their employment as a coherent strategic capability.

A hybrid architecture could therefore establish a centrally organised Joint Special Operations Command responsible for doctrine, training, capability development, force generation, specialised procurement, interoperability and long-term personnel development, while maintaining operational detachments or task-organised elements under the command of relevant theatre headquarters when missions require sustained regional presence. This would allow specialised capabilities to remain institutionally concentrated while ensuring that theatre commanders have timely access to forces suited to their operational requirements. The model would be particularly relevant for India because Special Forces may be required simultaneously across geographically and operationally distinct environments, including the northern and western borders, the maritime domain and contingencies involving terrorism, hostage rescue, strategic reconnaissance or other high-risk missions.

The effectiveness of such a model would, however, depend on clearly defined command relationships. Operational control during a mission would need to be unambiguous, while administrative control, training responsibility and capability development could remain with the centralised structure. Equally important would be an integrated intelligence architecture linking the Joint Special Operations Command with theatre intelligence organisations, enabling mission planning to draw upon HUMINT, TECHINT, ISR, cyber and open-source inputs. A hybrid model would thus represent not merely an organisational compromise but a mechanism for combining strategic coherence with operational flexibility. Its success would ultimately depend on clearly allocated authorities, interoperable communications, joint training, common doctrine and sustained institutional leadership.

Figure 1. Proposed command relationships in a hybrid Indian JSOC model (Comparative assessment of SOF command models)

Dimension	India: service-based arrangement	US reference: USSOCOM / JSOC	Proposed Indian hybrid model
Organisational basis	SOF capabilities are organised within the respective services.	USSOCOM provides a joint institutional framework; JSOC is a subordinate command focused on designated missions.	A joint JSOC-level institution supports force development while mission elements remain employable by theatre commands.
Command and control	Service-specific chains can complicate joint coordination.	A dedicated joint command structure supports specialised coordination;	Separate institutional responsibilities from mission-specific operational control, which is

Dimension	India: service-based arrangement	US reference: USSOCOM/JSOC	Proposed Indian hybrid model
		operational arrangements vary by mission.	assigned through approved directives.
Operational employment	Joint employment may require coordination across service structures.	Joint special operations are organised through established command relationships and task-specific arrangements.	Theatre commanders receive mission-tailored SOF elements or task forces for operations within their theatre.
Doctrine and training	Doctrine, training and readiness may be developed through service channels.	USSOCOM supports joint SOF doctrine, training, readiness and force development.	JSOC-level institution develops common doctrine, standards, training and readiness processes with the services.
Intelligence	Service and agency intelligence capabilities need deliberate fusion for joint missions.	Joint SOF operations draw on specialised intelligence and wider national/theatre systems.	A connected intelligence-fusion process links JSOC planning, theatre intelligence and authorised national agencies.
Enablers	Aviation, ISR, communications, logistics and medical support	Specialised and service-provided enablers are integrated according to	Theatre/service enablers support assigned SOF packages through pre-agreed support

Dimension	India: service-based arrangement	US reference: USSOCOM / JSOC	Proposed Indian hybrid model
	are often service provided.	mission requirements.	and coordination arrangements.
Resources and capability development	Capability priorities and resources are distributed across service structures.	USSOCOM has institutional responsibilities for SOF capability development and resourcing.	Joint institution identifies gaps and priorities; resource and acquisition authorities remain subject to government approved arrangements.
Theatre responsiveness	Joint task organisation can require additional coordination.	Mission-specific command arrangements provide a reference for task organised employment.	Theatre-assigned SOF elements are tailored to operational needs while retaining joint standards and institutional support.
Principal risk	Fragmentation and uneven interoperability.	Direct transplantation may not fit India's constitutional, administrative or military arrangements.	Ambiguous command authority or duplication unless roles, reporting lines and support responsibilities are explicitly defined.

Source: Author's own compilation from the text in the paper.

The table (Figure 1) above compares the major features of India's service-based arrangements with the American institutional reference and the proposed hybrid model for Indian scenarios. This

proposed model is conceptual and would require formal policy and command directives. Whereas Figure 2 below discusses a connected process should link JSOC intelligence/planning, theatre intelligence and authorised national agencies. Approved directives from the relevant governmental authorities would need to specify the precise information-sharing authorities, command relationships, and support obligations.

Figure 2: The Proposed command relationships

National political leadership		
Government-approved policy / direction ↓		
CDS: JOINT INTEGRATION AND OVERSIGHT (NOT AUTOMATICALLY TACTICAL COMMAND)		
Joint coordination; authority defined by approved directives ↓		
PROPOSED JSOC INSTITUTION	**INTEGRATED THEATRE COMMANDS**	**SERVICES / ENABLING ORGANISATIONS**
Doctrine, standards, training, force generation, capability development	Theatre planning, mission requirements, operational direction	Aviation, ISR, logistics, communications, medical support
Mission-specific allocation / attachment ↓	Mission-specific tasking ↓	Support coordination ↔
JOINT SOF TASK FORCE / THEATRE-ASSIGNED SOF ELEMENT		
Operational control as formally assigned for the mission ↓		
Mission execution		

Source: Author's own compilation from the text in the paper.

Figure 3. Indicative phased implementation plan

Phase / indicative timing	Key actions	Lead / participants	Expected output / decision gate
I. Design	Develop policy concepts; define mandate and command relationships; map existing SOF capabilities, personnel, enablers and gaps.	MoD, CDS/IDS, service headquarters and relevant stakeholders.	Approved concept of employment; clarified responsibilities; baseline capability map.
II. Establish nucleus	Create a joint planning nucleus; draft doctrine and procedures; develop training, intelligence-fusion and interoperability arrangements; conduct staff-level trials.	CDS/IDS, service SOF organisations and participating theatre HQs.	Working joint nucleus; draft doctrine/procedures; initial interoperability assessment.
III. Pilot	Test selected mission packages with one or more participating theatre HQs; exercise C2, intelligence, communications, logistics and support arrangements; evaluate performance.	JSOC nucleus, selected theatre HQs, services and supporting organisations.	Evaluated pilot; documented lessons; recommendations to revise command and support arrangements.
IV. Review and scale	Review legal/policy authority, personnel, resources, accountability and operational outcomes; refine structure; expand only where evaluation supports it.	Government/ MoD, CDS/IDS, proposed JSOC and theatre commands.	Decision on formalisation, modification or phased expansion.

Source: Author's own compilation from the text in the paper.

Figure 3 proposes an indicative phased implementation as an intended planning sequence. The phases should proceed only after review of authority, resources, readiness, and lessons from trials. However, the evaluation must assess command clarity, the speed of assembling mission-ready SOF packages, interoperability across services and theatre commands, and the quality and timeliness of intelligence. It should also measure responsiveness to theatre needs and whether exercises generate actionable lessons that are translated into corrective measures, improved procedures, and stronger operational readiness.

Strengthening the Authority and Functional Empowerment of the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

Empowering the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) is essential for translating political intent into credible joint operational capability, particularly for enabling structures such as the proposed Indian joint special operations structures. While creating the CDS and the Department of Military Affairs marked a significant step toward integration, the current framework remains largely coordinative rather than directive (Nayyar, 2007). To achieve meaningful jointness, the CDS must be vested with clear operational authority over tri-service institutions, including future Integrated Theatre Commands, strategic enablers such as cyber and space commands, and specialised formations like integrated special operations framework. Without such authority, jointness continues to depend on consensus among the services rather than unity of command, thereby limiting responsiveness and operational coherence in complex, multi-domain contingencies (PIB, 2025). Equally important is strengthening the role of CDS as the principal military advisor by institutionalising direct access to the highest political leadership and ensuring that all major operational and procurement decisions are filtered through a unified military perspective.

A critical dimension of CDS empowerment lies in structural integration with the Ministry of Defence and control over key resource and policy levers. The existing separation between civilian bureaucracy and military leadership has historically resulted in procedural delays and fragmented decision-making. Greater integration of service headquarters within the Ministry, along with the establishment of joint civil–military planning staffs, would ensure policy aligns with operational requirements. Furthermore, granting the CDS a decisive role in budgeting and resource allocation would shift the focus from service-centric planning to capability-based prioritisation aligned with national security objectives. Control over joint personnel policies, including career progression linked to joint tenures and integrated appointments, is equally vital to mitigate inter-service rivalry and foster a culture of jointness. Similarly, direct oversight of doctrine development and training institutions would allow the CDS to standardise operational procedures and embed joint thinking at both conceptual and professional levels (Kumar, 2025).

The CDS also needs authority over intelligence integration, crisis management, and long-term strategic planning to function effectively. In modern warfare, the fusion of intelligence across agencies is critical for timely and effective decision-making; therefore, the CDS must have structured access to national intelligence inputs and the mandate to coordinate inter-agency intelligence sharing. Additionally, positioning the CDS at the centre of national crisis management frameworks would ensure unified and rapid responses during high-stakes scenarios, including the employment of special operations forces. Equally important is developing a permanent joint strategic planning capability under the CDS, supported by war-gaming, future threat assessments, and alignment with national security objectives. However, these structural enhancements must be underpinned by sustained

political backing and, ideally, legislative support to institutionalise the CDS's authority and ensure continuity across administrations. Ultimately, empowering the CDS requires a transition from a system based on coordination and consensus to one grounded in authority, integration, and accountability, enabling the CDS to function as the central driver of defence transformation in India (Nashikkar, 2022; Subramaniam, 2026)

Strengthening the authority of the CDS should not be understood as concentrating all military decision making in one single office but it requires a clearly defined division of responsibilities amongst political leadership, the MoD, the CDS, theatre commanders and the proposed Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). It is proposed that the CDS should lead joint planning, capability prioritisation, doctrinal integration and coordination across theatre commands, while operational command of a mission should rest with the commander designated under approved command arrangements. This difference will help in reducing the uncertainty over who directs, supports and evaluates special operations, while preventing institutional authority from becoming confused with tactical control. The proposed framework must also preserve civil–military accountability. Political direction and the applicable governmental approval process should remain subject to decisions on the establishment, mandate, deployment, and resourcing of a joint SOF structure. The CDS should provide professional military advice and ensure that operational proposals are assessed jointly but should not independently determine the political objectives or authorisation of sensitive missions. The proposed JSOC and theatre intelligence organisations should have access to intelligence relevant to their assigned missions, but this should not imply unrestricted access to all national intelligence holdings. At the same time, information-sharing protocols should specify the purpose of

access, the level of classification, authorised recipients, procedures for protecting sources and methods, and the conditions under which information may be disseminated or retained. Further, mission related divisions could bring together relevant military and civilian intelligence personnel, with access governed by need-to-know and role-based permissions. Secure audit trails, periodic review and designated accountability mechanisms would help guard against unauthorised disclosure, misuse or inappropriate expansion of intelligence access. These mechanisms would make the hybrid model more than an organisational restructuring and would help in establishing a framework in which joint operational effectiveness is strengthened through defined authority, accountable decision making and disciplined intelligence sharing. The credibility of the proposed JSOC would therefore depend not only on its ability to coordinate forces, but also on the clarity and legitimacy of the institutional guidelines governing its actions.

Integrating Intelligence for Joint and Special Operations Effectiveness

Integrating intelligence for structures such as an Indian joint special operations structure, and more broadly for India's joint warfighting capability, requires a systemic transformation that transcends mere information sharing and moves toward a real-time, fused, decision-oriented ecosystem. At the core of this transformation is a unified intelligence-fusion architecture that brings diverse agencies together in a cohesive framework. A centralised multi-agency fusion centre under the CDS or the National Security Council would enable real time data sharing and integration of tactical, operational, and strategic intelligence streams. Such a structure would serve as a single authoritative source for decision-makers and operational commanders, ensuring coherence in threat assessment and response (Wig, 2025). In parallel, embedding dedicated multi-agency intelligence units

within integrated special operations framework would ensure that intelligence is mission-specific, actionable, and directly linked to operational planning. Integrating technical intelligence with human intelligence, alongside developing real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance networks, would enable continuous monitoring, target acquisition, and post-operation assessment, transforming intelligence into a core driver of operations rather than a peripheral support function (Wig, 2025). While intelligence fusion involves methodically integrating, contextualising, and interpreting data from various sources to provide actionable assessments, information sharing involves providing information to another agency. The distinction is crucial since merely increasing the amount of information shared does not guarantee that decision-makers would have access to higher quality or more timely insight. Information sharing can remain mostly transactional, with each agency sending reports according to defined protocols while still determining their importance. In contrast, intelligence fusion creates an analytical process that brings together, correlates, and evaluates data from many agencies, domains, and collection systems to identify trends, connections, anomalies, and new threats. For India's integrated theatre warfare framework, the movement from sharing towards fusion is particularly significant. Special Forces operations frequently depend on information that is distributed across military intelligence organisations, civilian agencies and technical collection systems. A fragmented system may give commanders individual pieces of information without showing how they relate to one another. Fusion can combine HUMINT, TECHINT, imagery and other ISR inputs with cyber, communications, geospatial and open-source information, thereby producing a more comprehensive operational picture. The objective should not be the indiscriminate pooling of all available data, but the creation of a structured mechanism through which relevant information is filtered,

validated, contextualised and converted into intelligence appropriate to a particular mission. An effective fusion architecture would therefore require common data standards, interoperable communication systems, clearly defined information-sharing protocols and analytical mechanisms capable of processing information from multiple sources. Artificial intelligence and data analytics can assist by identifying correlations and anomalies across large datasets, but human analysts remain essential for contextual interpretation, source evaluation, and assessing the reliability of competing information.

Institutionally, intelligence fusion also requires a culture of trust and clearly defined responsibilities. Agencies must be willing to share relevant information while protecting sensitive sources and methods. Mission-specific fusion cells could provide a practical mechanism by bringing together personnel from military intelligence, Special Forces and relevant civilian agencies during crises. Such an approach would transform intelligence from a collection of separately held inputs into a shared operational resource, strengthening situational awareness, decision-making and the responsiveness of integrated theatre operations.

Equally important is creating robust institutional and technological frameworks that enable seamless intelligence flow across services and agencies. Secure and interoperable communication systems must be developed to allow encrypted, real-time sharing of classified information across the Army, Navy, Air Force, and intelligence organisations. This must be complemented by the institutionalisation of a joint intelligence doctrine under the CDS, which defines roles, responsibilities, and standardised processes for information sharing and dissemination, thereby reducing ambiguity and enhancing coordination (Kumar, 2025). Intelligence must also be embedded at every stage of operational planning and execution, supported by feedback loops

to ensure a continuous intelligence–operations cycle. Furthermore, permanent inter-agency coordination mechanisms must replace ad hoc arrangements, enable structured collaboration, and eliminate duplication of effort. Applying advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence and big data analytics, would significantly improve the ability to process vast volumes of information, enabling predictive analysis and faster decision-making in complex operational environments.

Finally, integrating intelligence requires a comprehensive supporting framework that encompasses legal, cultural, and strategic dimensions. Clear legal and policy mandates must be established to facilitate inter-agency intelligence sharing while safeguarding sensitive sources, thereby reducing bureaucratic hesitation and procedural delays. Joint training programmes, cross-posting of personnel, and specialised professional military education in multi-domain intelligence are essential to foster a shared culture and build trust among institutions. Instituting accountability mechanisms, including performance benchmarks and periodic audits, is essential to ensure compliance and effectiveness. At the strategic level, intelligence must be aligned with national objectives rather than organisational priorities, ensuring that collection and analysis are driven by actionable outcomes. Crisis related frameworks, including predefined communication protocols and integrated command centres, would further enhance responsiveness during high-pressure situations. Ultimately, the integration of intelligence into a unified and responsive ecosystem would act as a decisive force multiplier, enabling precision, speed, and strategic impact in modern warfare and significantly strengthening India's joint operational capability.

Technology should not be treated as a substitute for jointness rather technological interoperability is dependent upon institutional interoperability. Modern military operations

increasingly rely on interconnected systems involving intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), secure communications, unmanned platforms, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence and real-time data exchange. However, advanced technologies alone do not automatically produce integrated military capability. If organisations operate through separate command structures, incompatible procedures and competing institutional priorities, even sophisticated technological systems may remain functionally fragmented.

Technological interoperability requires more than the ability of different platforms to connect technically. It requires common standards, shared procedures, compatible data architectures and clearly established responsibilities for collecting, processing, disseminating and acting upon information. For instance, an ISR platform may generate high-quality data, but its operational value depends on whether it can securely transmit that information to the relevant command, integrate it with other intelligence sources, and turn it into a decision within the required timeframe. Similarly, artificial intelligence can assist in identifying patterns across large datasets, but its effectiveness depends upon access to appropriately structured and shareable data and upon institutional arrangements that permit different organisations to use the resulting assessments.

This makes institutional interoperability a prerequisite for deriving the full benefits of technological integration. Joint doctrines, common training, interoperable communication protocols and integrated command structures provide the organisational foundation upon which technology can function effectively. Without these foundations, technological modernisation can potentially create additional layers of complexity, with different services or agencies acquiring specialised systems that are individually capable but unable to operate seamlessly within a wider operational architecture.

For India's integrated theatre warfare framework, the implication is that technology acquisition should proceed alongside organisational reform. Procurement decisions should therefore consider interoperability, common standards and cross-service integration rather than focusing exclusively on platform-specific capabilities. Joint experimentation and training can help identify technological gaps before they become operational problems. Similarly, integrated command structures can establish responsibility for ensuring that data, networks and systems support common operational objectives. Technology should therefore be understood as an enabler of jointness, not a replacement. The central requirement is to align technological architecture with institutional architecture so that information, capabilities and decision-making can move seamlessly across organisational boundaries during multi-domain operations.

Challenges in Inter-Agency Coordination

Inter-agency coordination in India's security architecture continues to suffer from institutional silos, bureaucratic delays, overlapping mandates, and inadequate technological integration. Agencies often operate through fragmented information systems, limiting real-time intelligence sharing and operational coordination. Trust deficits and inter-agency rivalry further weaken crisis response. The absence of a comprehensive national security strategy also results in inconsistent prioritisation across institutions. Addressing these challenges requires a centralised intelligence fusion mechanism, interoperable communication systems, and institutionalised joint training under the CDS framework.

One of the most fundamental challenges is institutional siloing, where different agencies operate within distinct organisational boundaries with limited information sharing. Intelligence agencies

such as RAW, IB, DIA, and NTRO, along with service-specific intelligence units, have historically developed their own mandates, processes, and reporting lines. This often leads to fragmented intelligence outputs, duplicated effort, and, in some cases, critical gaps in situational awareness. The absence of a centralised integration mechanism reinforces this fragmentation, with coordination often dependent on informal networks rather than formal institutional frameworks (MP-IDSA, 2012). Closely related is the lack of clarity in roles, responsibilities, and command relationships, which creates ambiguity during joint operations. Without clearly defined authority structures, agencies may hesitate to share sensitive information or take initiative, especially in high-stakes environments.

A second major challenge is inter-agency rivalry and trust deficits, both cultural and structural. Agencies often guard information because of concerns about source protection, operational security, and institutional relevance. This leads agencies to retain rather than share intelligence, particularly when jurisdictions overlap. Competition for influence, resources, and recognition further exacerbates this problem. In many cases, coordination becomes personality-driven, relying on relationships between individuals rather than institutionalised mechanisms. This lack of trust reduces the effectiveness of joint planning and impedes the development of a unified operational picture. Moreover, differences in professional culture between military and civilian agencies can further hinder collaboration, as each operates under distinct norms, priorities, and accountability systems (Choudhary, 2022).

Another critical constraint is bureaucratic inertia and procedural rigidity, particularly within the broader defence and security architecture. Decision-making processes are often hierarchical and time-consuming, which limits responsiveness in

fast-evolving situations. The absence of real-time communication systems and secure interoperable networks further delays information flow. Additionally, legal and policy ambiguities governing intelligence sharing create caution and limit proactive collaboration. Agencies may be uncertain about how much authority they have to share classified information, leading to delays or incomplete dissemination. The lack of a comprehensive national security strategy also contributes to this problem, as agencies may pursue their own priorities rather than aligning with a unified national objective. This results in misallocation of effort and reduced strategic coherence.

Technological disparities and uneven capability development also pose significant challenges. Different agencies often use incompatible systems, platforms, and data standards, making seamless integration difficult. The lack of a unified digital architecture limits the ability to process and fuse intelligence from multiple sources in real time. Furthermore, agencies underuse advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and big data analytics to support intelligence integration. Without modernised infrastructure, coordination efforts remain manual, slow, and prone to errors, particularly in high-tempo operations. Finally, a major underlying issue is the absence of institutionalised joint training, professional education, and accountability mechanisms. Personnel from different agencies rarely train together in a structured way, limiting mutual understanding and interoperability. There are also limited mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of inter-agency coordination or to hold organisations accountable for failures. Without clearly defined performance metrics and oversight structures, coordination efforts risk remaining superficial.

So, the challenges of inter-agency coordination stem from structural fragmentation, cultural mistrust, bureaucratic

complexity, and technological limitations. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reform that goes beyond procedural adjustments to include institutional restructuring, doctrinal clarity, technological integration, and the cultivation of a shared strategic culture aligned with national objectives.

Role of Leadership in Inter-Agency Coordination

Effective leadership is essential to translate jointness from concept into practice. Political and military leaders must provide sustained direction, institutional accountability, and strategic clarity to ensure cooperation among services and agencies. The CDS should function as the principal integrator for intelligence, operations, and doctrine development. Leadership is also critical for reducing inter-service rivalry, fostering a culture of information sharing, and ensuring that coordination mechanisms remain institutional rather than personality-driven.

Leadership plays a decisive and foundational role in ensuring effective inter-agency coordination, particularly in complex domains such as intelligence integration and joint military operations. At its core, coordination is not merely a structural or procedural function but a leadership-driven process that requires vision, authority, and the ability to align diverse institutional interests toward a common objective. Strong leadership provides the direction necessary to overcome hurdles and ensuring that agencies move beyond their individual mandates and contribute to a unified national security framework. In the absence of such leadership, coordination mechanisms tend to become fragmented, reactive, and personality-driven rather than institutionalised (Sydnes et al., 2025). One of leadership's primary roles is to define clear intent and strategic priorities that form the foundation for coordinated action. Effective leaders articulate a coherent vision that aligns intelligence agencies, military services, and government

institutions around shared goals. This reduces ambiguity in roles and responsibilities and ensures that all stakeholders operate within a common strategic framework. Leadership is also essential in establishing authority structures that enable decisive action (Sydnes et al., 2025). For instance, a strong central figure such as the CDS can provide unity of command and facilitate integration across services and agencies. By setting priorities, enforcing accountability, and resolving inter-agency conflicts, leadership ensures that coordination is driven by purpose rather than negotiation.

Leadership also plays an important role in building trust and fostering a culture of cooperation. Mistrust, information hoarding, and institutional rivalry often hinder inter-agency coordination. Effective leaders address these issues by promoting transparency, encouraging information sharing, and creating incentives for collaboration. This includes institutionalising joint training, cross-posting of personnel, and shared professional experiences, all of which contribute to mutual understanding and trust. Leadership must also act as a mediator in resolving turf conflicts, ensuring that cooperation is prioritised over competition. Without such cultural transformation, even the best-designed coordination structures are unlikely to work effectively.

Leadership is also critical to driving the institutional and procedural reforms needed for sustained coordination. This includes establishing joint doctrines, integrating communication systems, and creating formal mechanisms for inter-agency collaboration. Leaders must ensure that coordination is embedded in organisational processes rather than dependent on informal relationships. Leadership also plays a key role in overcoming bureaucratic inertia by driving reforms, ensuring compliance, and sustaining momentum over time. In this context, sustained political and military leadership is essential to translate conceptual ideas

into operational capabilities. Another key dimension is leadership's role in crisis management and decision-making under pressure. During high-stakes situations, effective coordination depends on the ability to make rapid, informed decisions based on integrated intelligence inputs. Strong leadership ensures unity of effort, prevents duplication, and aligns all agencies toward a common operational objective. It also establishes clear communication channels and reinforces accountability, which are critical in fast-moving scenarios. Leadership must ensure continuous engagement and oversight to sustain coordination over the long term. This includes monitoring performance, evaluating outcomes, and making necessary adjustments to policies and structures. Leadership must also engage political authorities to secure support for reforms and align with national objectives. In essence, leadership acts as the central integrator in inter-agency coordination. While structures, technologies, and processes provide the framework, leadership provides coherence, direction, and momentum. Effective coordination ultimately reflects leadership quality, as it determines whether institutions operate in isolation or function as a unified system capable of addressing complex security challenges.

Conclusion

India’s evolving security environment and the changing character of warfare make integrating SOF into the theatre command framework an operational and strategic imperative. Although the Army, Navy, and Air Force have capable special operations units, fragmented command and employment limit coordinated action, intelligence sharing, and timely decision-making. *This study argues that India should establish a joint special operations structure that enables the coordinated employment of service-specific capabilities within the broader theatre command system.* Such a structure would reduce duplication, improve command and

control, and ensure SOF are employed to support clearly defined joint operational objectives.

The establishment of an integrated structure, however, cannot be achieved through organisational redesign alone. Inter-service rivalry, institutional resistance, divergent service doctrines, and the absence of sustained strategic direction remain significant obstacles. Addressing these constraints requires a clearly defined role for the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), institutionalised joint planning and doctrinal mechanisms, and arrangements that facilitate intelligence fusion across the armed services and relevant agencies. Political and military leadership must also provide sustained direction, oversight, and accountability to ensure that integration translates into operational practice.

The study's central inference is that India needs to move beyond coordinating separate service-based special operations units toward a genuinely joint special operations capability aligned with its emerging theatre command framework. This would not require abandoning service expertise; instead, it could bring distinct capabilities under a coherent system of planning, command, and intelligence support. With support from appropriate authority, doctrine, and inter-agency cooperation, such integration could improve the responsiveness and strategic utility of India's SOF and strengthen the country's broader capacity for integrated theatre warfare.

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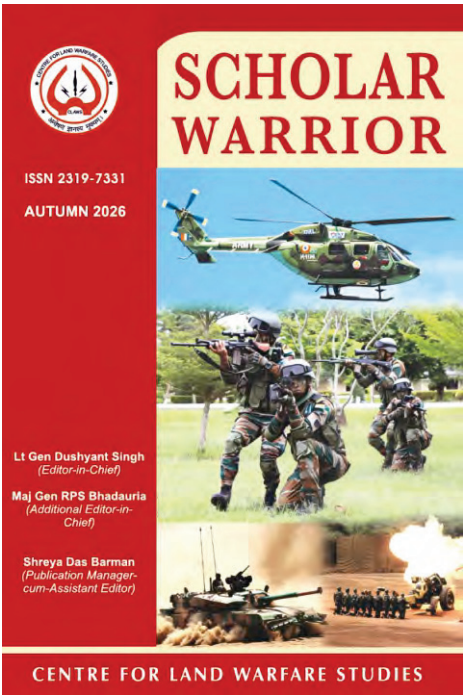
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The changing character of warfare and India's complex security environment necessitate greater integration of Special Operations Forces (SOF) within the emerging theatre command framework. This paper examines the operational, institutional, and strategic challenges limiting the joint employment of India's Special Forces across the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Adopting a qualitative analytical approach and a comparative assessment of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), it explores the implications of fragmented command structures, inter-service rivalries, and inadequate intelligence integration. The paper proposes a hybrid Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) model that combines centralised capability development, training, and doctrine with mission-specific operational deployment under theatre commands. It further emphasises the role of the Chief of Defence Staff, intelligence fusion, technological interoperability, and sustained political direction. The study argues that institutional integration, supported by clear command relationships and accountability mechanisms, is essential to strengthening India's joint operational effectiveness and multi-domain warfare capabilities.

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