

The Daily Star

Thursday, "May 23, 2019"

INCREASED INTEROPERABILITY OF LAND FORCES WITH THE ALLIES AND PARTNERS-BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE



General Aziz Ahmed

In the context of today's complex operational environment, interoperability is a measure of the degree to which various organisations or individuals are able to operate together to achieve a common goal. Commonly, interoperability involves parameters like standardisation, integration and cooperation. Interoperability specifics, however, are not well defined. They are often situation-dependent, come in various forms and degrees, and can

occur at various levels—strategic, operational, and tactical as well as technological. In enhancing interoperability, the Bangladesh Army focuses on integration and cooperation aspects mostly through addressing the challenges of language, environmental and cultural diversities, and local dynamics present in a multinational setting.

The Bangladesh Army came into being during the War of Liberation in 1971. Even at its inception, the Army fought as part of India-Bangladesh allied forces. Subsequently, the conduct of a prolonged and successful insurgency operation, in a region among people of diverse ethnicity, equipped the organisation well to undertake operations where linguistic and cultural differences remain a major barrier. In addition, the good practices prevailing in Bangladesh society and within the organisation, like reliance on an effective and dynamic training system, have further enhanced the adaptability of the force. All these capabilities have facilitated the Bangladesh Army's entry in the domain of peace operations and paved the way towards becoming a leading troop-contributing country in the United Nations Peace Operations.

Since her involvement with Blue-Helmet, within a decade, Bangladesh became one of the top Troop-Contributing Countries (TCC) to United Nations peacekeeping missions. Beside this, for the first time, in Operation Desert Shield in 1990, the Bangladesh Army was exposed to large-scale multinational experience in Iraq. Since then, the Bangladesh Army has been continuing its participation in this region by contributing troops under Operation Reconstruction Kuwait. Recently, the Bangladesh Army signed a memorandum of understanding with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) under which we are preparing to send two contingents of mine-clearance teams to sweep landmines in the southern provinces of the KSA. Bangladeshi peacekeepers now have their footprints covering large parts of Africa, Middle East, Central Europe and America. Till date, more than 155,000 Bangladeshi peacekeepers have taken part in 54 peacekeeping missions in 40 countries. United Nations now entrusts the responsibility of missions under challenging environments to Bangladeshi contingents where requirement of interoperability is high. For example, Bangladeshi forces have been operating smoothly as part of heterogeneous forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Mali and Central Africa maintaining the required degree of interoperability with the partners and allies.

Though we have enhanced our interoperability over the period overcoming many difficulties, unresolved challenges in the field of interoperability still remain. In a multinational environment, one of the key factors behind making any force effective in consonance with other forces is conceptualisation of the problem for which the mission has been mandated. Absence of appropriate representation of TCC at different levels starting from Department of Peace Operations (DPO), where the conceptualisation of the mission takes place, turns out to be a limitation for the participating nations in preparing their forces well in time, especially in terms of equipping and interoperability issues.

Success of any mission relies on synergy of actions among the three components: civilian, military and police. In a military setting, commanders at different levels, starting from the force commander, emphasise on their individual command philosophy to be pursued by the contingents operating under them. At times, command philosophies contradict the broader philosophy of the mission given by the special representative of the secretary general. These contradictions give way to challenges to the integration domain of interoperability. Therefore, the integration requirement among civilian, military and police in UN peace operations remains a significant challenge.

Social construct as a subset of the overall operational environment of the mission area always exists as an inherent challenge for smooth functioning of the outfits. Varied outlooks of the deployed forces towards local culture, values and social practices affect the cooperation aspect of interoperability. The social, cultural and linguistic differences among the deployed forces have really become a prime concern in the integration aspect of interoperability.

Differences in national military approaches impact the credibility of multinational forces imposing many functional challenges. In the functional domain, lack of integration is noticed mainly due to diverse training system of the contingents based on own doctrinal orientation and non-interoperable equipment of contingents from different countries. Besides, differences in prioritising between self-protection and peace operation tasks by the contingents sometimes develop a significant challenge in integration of the forces.

Timely equipping of forces prior to deployment in mission area with agreed upon equipment is one of the greatest challenges for integration of forces in a multinational setting. Absence of appropriate representation at all levels of DPO has made this challenge more acute. As a means of addressing this challenge through experience in peace operations, the Bangladesh Army has developed an organisational farsightedness in assessing the type and quantity of equipment likely to be deployed in upcoming peace operations.

Shared understanding of different cultures is essential to operate effectively with multiple partners. It is the key to success for working in multinational environments. Bangladesh as a nation inherited a rich culture. Cultural pluralism is embedded in our national character. Showing a high degree of respect towards cultural diversity, we try to win over the hearts and minds of the local population and also the forces of other countries operating in the same mission. This substantially minimises the challenge of social construct in mission areas.

The relevance of training cannot be overestimated in achieving interoperability. Better training reduces the gap and increases efficiency while working with multiple partners to achieve common objectives. The Bangladesh Army conducts extensive theoretical and practical training at BIPSOT and under respective formation during their pre-deployment training, where mission mandate, concept of operations and rules of engagement are deliberately explained and rehearsed. Over the years, BIPSOT has been generating opportunities for large-scale engagement of the Bangladesh Army with multinational partners through conduct of joint multinational exercises.

After returning from overseas operations, the Bangladesh Army contingents endorse challenges and lessons learnt. As part of research and development tasks, our overseas operations directorate analyses all these and modifies the training curricula and approach towards peace operations. This is a continuous process and has been contributing towards increasing interoperability. On doctrinal aspects, besides our own doctrine, our officers learn doctrines of our allies and partner countries through exchange programmes. Incorporation of relevant aspects from doctrines of other countries has made our doctrine a robust one, making our forces capable of operating in any challenging environment.

In addition to the multinational events organised by BIPSOT, joint training events undertaken by the Bangladesh Army enhance our interoperability with land forces of other nations. We regularly conduct joint command post exercises, special force exercises and fire and manoeuvre exercises with countries like the US, the UK, India, Sri Lanka, KSA, Turkey, Kuwait, Singapore, etc. Besides learning common tactics, our troops are also made aware of the social, cultural and linguistic differences of our allies and partners. This learning holistically contributes in increasing interoperability.

Joint exercises are the appropriate method of identifying interoperability gaps and implementing required measures. Though the Bangladesh Army is arranging joint exercises in collaboration with other countries, the numbers are not significant. Therefore, more joint exercises may be planned amongst Indo-Pacific land forces at regular intervals to enhance the interoperability of the forces.

Issues like technology transfer, knowledge-sharing, increased exchange programmes, and collaboration in operations other than war can contribute to capacity-building of armies of the developing nations. A thoughtful gesture of the technologically advanced militaries in terms of technological capacity-building through technology transfer can serve as one step forward towards enhancing interoperability of the developing countries.

Enhanced cooperation among prevalent training institutions within Indo-Pacific countries may be considered as a tool to increase interoperability. Cooperation may range from conducting collective seminars, exchange programmes both in terms of delivering training packages and faculty exchange, to research and development, etc. Special attention may be given to the issue of interoperability that will simultaneously make the forces ready to undertake both peace operations and combat operations if situations demand.

The Bangladesh Army has put a great deal of emphasis on interoperability which we think to be the key to our success in the peacekeeping undertakings. In our viewpoint, this particular aspect helps shaping the conditions for working in collaboration with partners and creates a space for need-based mutual interface. Therefore, for Bangladesh or any other nation that wants to do well in multinational engagement, interoperability shall appear in the forefront. Besides, increased interoperability shall

always stand unique as a judging parameter for measuring the level of preparedness of any force to undertake any operational responsibility in support of the partner countries.

This paper was presented by the author in the Symposium and Exposition of Land Forces of the Pacific in Hawaii on May 22, 2019. This article is exclusive to The Daily Star.

General Aziz Ahmed, BSP, BGBM, PBGM, BGBMS, psc, G is the Chief of Army Staff, Bangladesh Army.