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## Working in Real Time

14 Feb, 2012   [Ajit Doval, KC - Former Director, VIF](#)   [View724](#)   [Comments 0](#)

Will the long-awaited National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), which will come into existence on March 1, make a difference? Most commentators feel it is nothing more than affixing a fanciful American label that had fascinated home minister P Chidambaram on the decade-old Multi-Agency Centre (MAC). It took him three years to set it up.

It is true that the NCTC will not be what the minister declared it would be when he addressed Intelligence Bureau (IB) officers on December 23, 2009. At the time, he described it as an outfit capable of "preventing a terrorist attack, containing a terrorist attack should one take place, and responding to a terrorist attack by its perpetrators". It is also true that in terms of its charter, authority, empowerment and resources, it cannot match its American namesake. However, it is certain that over what exists now. While the Indian centre has little in common with its US counterpart, their underlying doctrines have much in common. Of course, one has grossly missed out and the devil lies in the detail.

The MAC was created following the recommendations of the Group of Ministers, which was set up by the NDA in 2001 to suggest comprehensive reform of the security apparatus.

The outfit, headed by a part-time additional director in the IB, maintained a databank of terrorists and their collaborators, terrorist organisations, details including their modus operandi, tactics, communication links, weapons and equipment used etc. The outfit had representatives from all central intelligence forces and central police organisations who were both contributors and beneficiaries of the all-source databank.

They met regularly to exchange and evaluate intelligence inputs, assess impending threats and worked out possible responses. The sharing of intelligence was informal and unstructured, often leaving gaping holes. MAC did not collect intelligence or carry out intelligence operations. The NCTC, however, will be an independent unit that will collect, evaluate and analyse intelligence, maintain a databank and coordinate counter-terrorist operations. Headed by a full time director, the NCTC will be more efficient, faster and better coordinated.

The IB, despite being the nodal agency for counter terrorism, as a secret organisation was handicapped in several ways and had to play the role of an invisible hand. It did not cross the red lines. Their support in terms of providing intelligence, working out plans for physical action, covert operational and technical support. Often, operational intelligence and follow up plans, painstakingly developed at grave personal risks, were lost due to lack of professional expertise, sense of urgency, equipment, and even motivation of the local police. The IB could not intervene beyond a point. The NCTC, with powers accruing to it under section 43A of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (UAPA), 1967, to arrest anybody having a 'design to commit' or 'having committed' any act of terror, will be able to take preventive and prompt action on its own. Importantly, the law makes reliable intelligence "from personal knowledge or information given by any person" as the basis for undertaking operations. Empowerment under UAPA should enable the NCTC to search and seize any 'building', 'conveyance' or 'place' that is suspected to have terrorist links and thus enhance its effectiveness.

Further, the NCTC will have the powers to requisition the services of the NSG or any other special force for undertaking counter-terrorist operations. In effect, if the NCTC has reliable intelligence, it can under its own empowerment, co-opt central forces to complement the local police and make up for their manpower, equipment, logistics etc.

Taking advantage of its nationwide jurisdiction, the information gathered by the NCTC during search operations or initial questioning of the suspects, can be used in supplementary operations in any part of the country taking help of the local police to meet legal requirements. It will set in motion the chain of counter-terrorist operations. This is distinct from situations in the past when many opportunities were lost due to legal-jurisdictional problems, hassles in priming up police forces, communication loop, delays in tying up logistics etc. The best operational intelligence is obtained within two to three hours of a successful operation when terrorists are caught and recovered and mobile phones are seized. However, the shelf-life of all these is just a few hours before the information is flashed by the media. The NCTC will substantially cover this gap.

The fears expressed in some quarters that the head of NCTC, being a relatively junior officer, will be unable to deliver are unfounded. The NCTC will have all the advantages of having a counter-terrorism centre of this kind, the government must opt for a dynamic and relatively young additional director who is responsible for its operations.

Notwithstanding the gaps, the NCTC has much to offer. Over a period of time, it will be necessary to empower it more. It must acquire statutory status from Parliament. The home ministry should look for officers with professional competence and motivation to man the organisation. The counter-terrorist units are being re-organised on the pattern of the NCTC to bring about uniformity and seamless integration in national counter-terrorism efforts. Needless to say, the Centre. But eventually much will have to be done by the NCTC and this includes enhancing its intelligence capabilities, injecting speed and surprise in its operations, R&D unit and upgrading the use of technology.

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