

SPECIAL REPORT

no. 249

Tracing the Origins of India's Special Frontier Force

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FEBRUARY 2025

Introduction

Project Sunray, Operation Sunrise, and Operation Sundown^a are code names for operations associated with the Special Frontier Force (SFF), or Establishment 22 under the Cabinet Secretariat in India. The SFF is a covert operations unit that reports to the Secretary of the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). Established in November 1962, it was designed as India's offensive covert unit against China. While the political goal at the time was to free Tibet from Chinese control, the SFF served as the covert arm.

The enduring popularity of the SFF *Vikasi* song^b in the SFF reflects the original ethos and purpose for which the force was established.

The SFF's roots can be traced to the Chushi Gangdruk ("Four Rivers and Six Ranges"), an armed resistance movement formed after China's capture of Lhasa in 1951.¹ Initially tasked with covert operations in Tibet, the SFF continued the work of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Tibet programme, which had trained Khampa resistance fighters.

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- a Project Sunray was the codename for raising the Special Group in 1982. Sunrise was the operation intended to rescue six foreigners and their two guides in the custody of the Al-Faran (pseudonym used by Harkat-ul-Ansar) terrorist group in Jammu and Kashmir in 1994. Sundown was the name of the proposed operation to kidnap Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale from the Golden Temple in 1984. Project Sunrise and Project Sundown never took place.
- b The first few lines of the *Vikasi* song are as follows (translated): "We are the *Vikasi* // The Chinese snatched Tibet from us and kicked us out from our home // Even then, India kept us like their own // One day, surely one day we will teach the Chinese a lesson".

Attribution: Bhashyam Kasturi, *Tracing the Origins of India's Special Frontier Force*, ORF Special Report No. 249, February 2025, Observer Research Foundation.

These fighters were infiltrated into the Mustang region in the late 1950s by the CIA to harass and target Chinese forces involved in the invasion of Tibet.²

This report revisits the origins of the SFF to preserve institutional memory and contextualise its establishment. Three key factors led to its creation. First is the US-India intelligence collaboration on Tibet and the promotion of guerrilla warfare within Tibet. This arose from the antagonism of the United States (US) towards Communist China in the 1950s and the disquiet caused by Chinese border incursions into India, ending in the 1962 border war. Second is the presence of the 14th Dalai Lama in India and the presence of Chushi

Gangdruk fighters, which provided opportunities for the US, and later India, to recruit Tibetans (mainly Khampas) into a resistance force. Third is the 1962 border war with China, which spurred the Indian government to propose the creation of a Tibetan resistance force. While the seeds were sown by the CIA, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) gave the force its own Indian character.

The border war also led to the creation of command-and-control systems for covert operations under Indian intelligence, formalised in the Prime Minister's Secretariat in February 1965.^c Based on secondary sources, this analysis highlights the need for deploying the SFF strategically to advance India's defence and security goals against China.

c This was the Directorate General of Security, first headed by B.N. Mullik after his retirement from the IB.

Background

Established during the Cold War, the idea of SFF was a continuation of the CIA's Tibetan initiative, which recruited, trained, and infiltrated Khampa rebels into China to combat occupying Chinese forces. In the early 1950s, when the US decided to support the Tibetan cause, the CIA set up training facilities in the US to prepare Tibetan soldiers for guerrilla operations against the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The aim was to disrupt and destabilise the PLA within Tibet. However, the Tibetan resistance suffered heavy losses, with most fighters either neutralised or escaping to India. In 1960, the CIA shifted its strategy and established a new Tibetan guerrilla base in the Mustang region of northern Nepal, along the Tibet border. This region, which is culturally and geographically linked to Tibet, provided a suitable base for continued resistance efforts.³

Establishment 22 was a joint India-US initiative on Tibet, encompassing various intelligence operations. It was meant to spearhead India's covert offensive capability against China. Supporting this effort, the Aviation Research Centre (ARC) was established on 7 September 1963 to provide aerial support and intelligence on China. Initially, the ARC facilitated air support for India- and CIA-led guerrilla activities. Another unit, the Special Services Bureau (SSB), was created to lead civic action along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and was initially placed under the Ministry of External Affairs. By 1965, all these organisations were consolidated under the Prime Minister's Secretariat.⁴

By 1959, confronted with an increasingly belligerent China, India began exploring options to counter the threat. Amid the border conflict, figures like B.N. Mullik, Director of IB, and Biju Patnaik, Chief Minister of Orissa (now Odisha), proposed raising a “stay-behind”⁵ force to harass Chinese troops if they occupied Indian territory, particularly Assam.⁶ After the war, this goal was modified to creating a force capable of infiltrating Tibet and engaging Chinese forces there, giving rise to the concept of Establishment 22. Patnaik and Mullik were the architects of this initiative; while Patnaik provided on-ground logistics,⁷ Mullik secured the necessary clearances from then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. After retiring in 1964, Mullik was put in charge of the Directorate General of Security (DGS)⁸ to oversee the government’s covert operations programme.

The SFF initially comprised Tibetan (mostly Khampa) recruits, drawn from the refugees who fled to India in 1959. Young Tibetan men—and later women—joined the force. From a Tibetan perspective, the SFF’s origin can also be linked to the Chushi Gangdruk, the Tibetan resistance force formed after China’s invasion of Tibet in 1951.⁹ Many of the SFF’s political leaders, or Dapon,

had previously fought with the Chushi Gangdruk against Chinese forces before the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959. The Dalai Lama’s awareness of these activities is evident, as both the CIA and the IB approached his brother, Gyalo Thondup, to assist with raising the force. Additionally, during the 1971 war, when the SFF was deployed in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, its leadership sought the Dalai Lama’s blessings.¹⁰

After the first wave of Chinese attacks in October 1962, V.K. Krishna Menon and General B.M. Kaul had discussed the feasibility of raising a Tibetan force to attack the Chinese PLA from within Tibet.¹¹ They identified Brigadier Sujan Singh Uban (later Major General S.S. Uban) as the first commander of this force. At the time, Brigadier Uban had just retired from service; it was much after the force was raised that he was promoted to major general.^{4,12} To this day, the commander of the SFF holds the rank of Major General in the Indian Army and is designated as Inspector General, SFF.

d One says Uban was commanding 26 Artillery Brigade in Kashmir at this time. Further, the number ‘22’ was used as the codename for the SFF (“Establishment 22”) as Uban had commanded the 22nd Medium Regiment during the Second World War.

The American Connection

The suggestion to create such a force originated from then CIA Chief, Allen Dulles, who sought to address the lack of coordination between the CIA and the large, unwieldy Chushi Gangdruk guerrillas operating from Nepal's Mustang region. He believed that India's involvement would bring better organisation to the effort. This led to the establishment of the Joint Operations Centre, or Special Centre, in Delhi in September 1963 to oversee the dispatch of agents into Tibet and monitor their activities.¹³ B.N. Mullik later recounted a conversation with Sir Roger Hollis, then director general of MI5, who suggested that the IB create a Tibetan sabotage force for cross-border clandestine operations against PLA units, garrisons, and facilities in Tibet. To maintain deniability, the force was to consist

solely of Tibetans and follow the model of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) from the Second World War.¹⁴

In November 1962, following a request from Jawaharlal Nehru, the Kennedy administration sent a delegation comprising representatives from the State Department, Pentagon, and CIA to discuss India's needs. The CIA delegation worked out the framework of engaging Tibetan guerrillas for clandestine activities with Mullik and other officials. The CIA offered to support the creation of a paramilitary force of Tibetan exiles in India, under the IB's supervision,¹⁵ to conduct intelligence gathering and clandestine operations in Tibet during future Indo-China conflicts.

India agreed to sustain guerrilla operations within Tibet from their base in Mustang. While Indian involvement in the Mustang operations declined significantly by the late 1960s, the CIA continued the programme until the early 1970s, when the US shifted its policy to engage with China and ended support for the Tibetan resistance. This marked the beginning of India's sole tryst with Tibetan recruits, trained as an elite special operations force, for fighting a common enemy. Over time, both the size and scope of this unit expanded.

A tripartite agreement was signed between the IB, the CIA, and Chushi Gangdruk in 1962, with the Tibetan outfit represented by General Gompo Tashi Andrugtsang and Jogo Namgyal Dorjee. Under this agreement, Chushi Gangdruk was to source 12,000 Tibetan Khampa fighters from the potential recruits available in Mustang, Nepal.¹⁶ For Mullik, these fighters were akin to the Gorkhas, providing the Indian government with two streams of foreign nationals in its force: Gorkhas from Nepal in the Indian Army and the Khampas from Tibet in Establishment 22. The CIA deployed an eight-member team of instructors, led by former US Marine Corps (USMC) Colonel Wayne Sanford, then head of

the CIA's Special Operations Group.¹⁷ Colonel Sanford played a key role in establishing the operational framework and training matrix for the force.

By 1968, the US administration had lost interest in the Tibet Support Programme, with President Richard Nixon's rapprochement and secret visit to China in February 1972 serving as the proximate cause. A 26 January 1968 Memorandum for the 303 Committee (earlier known as the Special Group and renamed so on 2 June 1964) highlighted that the programme had originally sought to contain the expansion of Chinese communism.¹⁸ The report noted that Tibetan resistance groups were not progressing towards achieving "internal autonomy" and China's control over Tibet was not weakening. A review by the Committee in February 1964 showed that the projected cost of all Tibetan operations was US\$1,735,000, though savings had been made since the training programme for Tibetans had been discontinued.¹⁹ With the political shift towards engaging China, it was deemed practical to scale back the Tibet support programme. By then, the CIA had transferred responsibility for the programme to India's IB.

The Indian Planners

On 26 October 1962, B.N. Kaul and Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon met Brigadier S.S. Uban—who had been identified from a list of retiring officers—in South Block to discuss the idea of creating a Tibetan resistance force. They proposed forming a guerrilla force to fight China, initially on Indian territory. Subsequently, Gyalo Thondup was brought in from Darjeeling to recruit volunteers for the SFF, and he agreed to raise 5,000 volunteers. A key question arose: Should the IB or the Ministry of Defence be involved? Based on his earlier contact with B.N. Mullik and his current cooperation with the CIA (through Lhamo Tsering), Gyalo Thondup quickly opted for the IB.²⁰ As he later noted in his memoirs, the CIA suggested that training should be conducted jointly with Indian intelligence.²¹

Ratuk Ngawang, in his memoirs (in Tibetan), recalls that Gyalo Thondup, along with Gonpo Tashi and Andruk Zesak, called for a meeting in Darjeeling. During the meeting, Gyalo Thondup suggested that the Mustang base not be a permanent operation and proposed establishing a military training academy in India instead.²² Ratuk's memoirs also highlight that the force received the blessings of the Dalai Lama early on and had a letter from the Kashag to assist in locating Tibetans who could be recruited. More importantly, in the minds of the Tibetans, the force was meant to be led by Tibetans themselves. This is evident from the call for senior Khampa commanders to gather in Kalimpong, some of whom were appointed as Dapons and sent to Chakrata.

By early November 1962, an initial contingent of over 5,000 Tibetans, led by Jamba Kalden, was dispatched to Dehra Dun, home to the Indian Military Academy and several prestigious boarding schools. Brigadier Uban, along with a small team of Indian Army officers on loan, met the Tibetans. A transit camp was set up on the town's edge to process the 5,000 promised volunteers. On 14 November 1962, the Indian cadre and four political leaders shifted 92 kilometers northwest to Chakrata.

All this movement must have been reported to Prime Minister Nehru by Mullik. On 17 November 1962, Nehru wrote to Vishnu Sahay, then Governor of Assam: "I think the time has also come to train Guerrilla Units. We are taking this in hand elsewhere in NEFA using Khampas and tribal people."²³ American authors Conboy and Morrison claim that, in autumn 1962, with the deployment of the eight-man CIA team almost finished, Nehru was invited to make an inspection visit to the hill camp. The IB also requested Nehru to use the opportunity to address the guerrillas. He agreed to visit but declined to deliver a speech, fearing diplomatic fallout if word of his speech

leaked. Hearing this news, Brigadier Uban had the men of Establishment 22 undergo a quick lesson in parade drill. Ratuk indicates that Nehru visited Chakrata on 13 September 1963, along with Gyalo Thondup. The four Tibetan Dapon presented a letter requesting the Prime Minister to send them to Tibet at the earliest.²⁴

Though stiff and formal upon his arrival on 13 September, Nehru was visibly moved upon seeing the Tibetans in formation. Knowing that the prime minister had a fondness for roses, Uban presented him with a brilliant red blossom from a garden he had planted near his bungalow. Asking for a microphone, the prime minister delivered heartfelt comments to the guerrillas. According to Uban, Nehru expressed India's support for their cause and vowed they would one day return to an independent Tibet.^{e,25} However, Ratuk Ngawang offers a different account, which appears more plausible. He recalls that, on 25 March 1963, Gyalo Thondup and Brigadier Uban, along with five IB officers, arrived in Chakrata to introduce the Tibetan leaders to the IB. During this meeting, Brigadier Uban proposed naming the force the SFF and designating it with the number 22.

e According to Conboy and Morrison, Nehru visited Chakrata on 14 November 1963.

Way Forward

The founding of the SFF is a Cold War classic, where India, the US, and Tibet came together to confront China. It demonstrated that India-US intelligence cooperation during the Cold War went beyond individuals, with B.N. Mullik playing a crucial role in shifting US collaboration on the Tibetan front from Pakistan to India. While the US interest in containing China reduced after Henry Kissinger's visit to Beijing in February 1972, India continued its own engagement with China. The SFF persisted in training and preparing for operations within

China, a role it continues today. In the interim, the force also participated in the 1971 Bangladesh war, the 1999 Kargil war, and several operations, either independently or in support of the Indian Army.

The actions of the SFF during the Galwan clashes in mid-2020 rekindled public interest in the force. Vikas battalions of the SFF were used in the capture of the Kailash Range in Eastern Ladakh on the night of 29/30 August 2020.^f The SFF's involvement in Operation Snow Leopard became widely known after Nyima Tenzin, a Company Leader, stepped on an old land mine and died while patrolling the south bank of Pangong Tso in early September 2020.²⁶


^f A glance at the List of personnel conferred with Gallantry Awards and Distinguished Service by the President in January 2024 for Operation Snow Leopard shows three officers from HQ, SFF being mentioned in dispatches (<https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/jan/doc2024125302501.pdf>). Lt. Col. Neeraj Singh of 7 Vikas was conferred the Sena Medal for Operation Snow Leopard. See: <https://www.instagram.com/ssbcrackofficial/p/CZE2gorFBu6/>

The SFF remains a national asset, integral to achieving specific foreign policy and national security goals. Originally tasked with infiltrating deep into China to harass Chinese forces, the SFF has evolved as a strategic tool for India to challenge China in Tibet. It is trained for a broad range of operations, including surveillance, intelligence gathering, and fighting behind enemy lines. For several years, small SFF units have been deployed across the entire border, with one battalion permanently stationed in Siachen after Operation Meghdoot in 1984.²⁷ The organisation and functioning of the SFF also played a pivotal role in the creation of India's National Security Guard (NSG), with two Squadrons of Special Group at its core when the NSG was established in 1986.²⁸

The SFF must be refashioned to return its original mandate. While its involvement in tactical missions like Snow Leopard, Kargil, and Siachen indicates the utilisation of its high-altitude warfare capabilities, this detracts from the force's primary mission. The way forward is to review the historical role of the SFF and the Special Group (raised in 1977) to understand the unique role played by this force.

The SFF was and remains a China-oriented force. The primary mission of the force was to perform covert operations behind Chinese

lines. Although India and China are currently engaged in discussions to resolve their boundary issues, the dispute remains unresolved. More importantly, China's actions, such as its policy on the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and the ongoing expansion of military infrastructure on the Tibetan plateau, underscore the continued relevance of the SFF's original purpose. In light of this, the SFF should be preserved as India's primary covert operations force against China. Reducing it to a paramilitary unit operating as a regular army force or reassigning it to border-guarding duties, as the Special Services Bureau was in 2007, would be a tragedy.

The original objective of raising such a force for use under the DGS against China has been diluted over the years. After the creation of the R&AW in 1968, the DGS was brought under Secretary (R)—a logical move as external intelligence and associated operations fell under R&AW's purview. While the employment and deployment of the SFF under the Cabinet Secretariat is thus appropriate, it is essential to concentrate these forces on operations against China. A review of the SFF's activities, perhaps undertaken by the China Study Group, would be valuable for determining its future role. If India is to maintain a specialised force for covert and clandestine operations against China, the SFF must be revitalised. 

Endnotes

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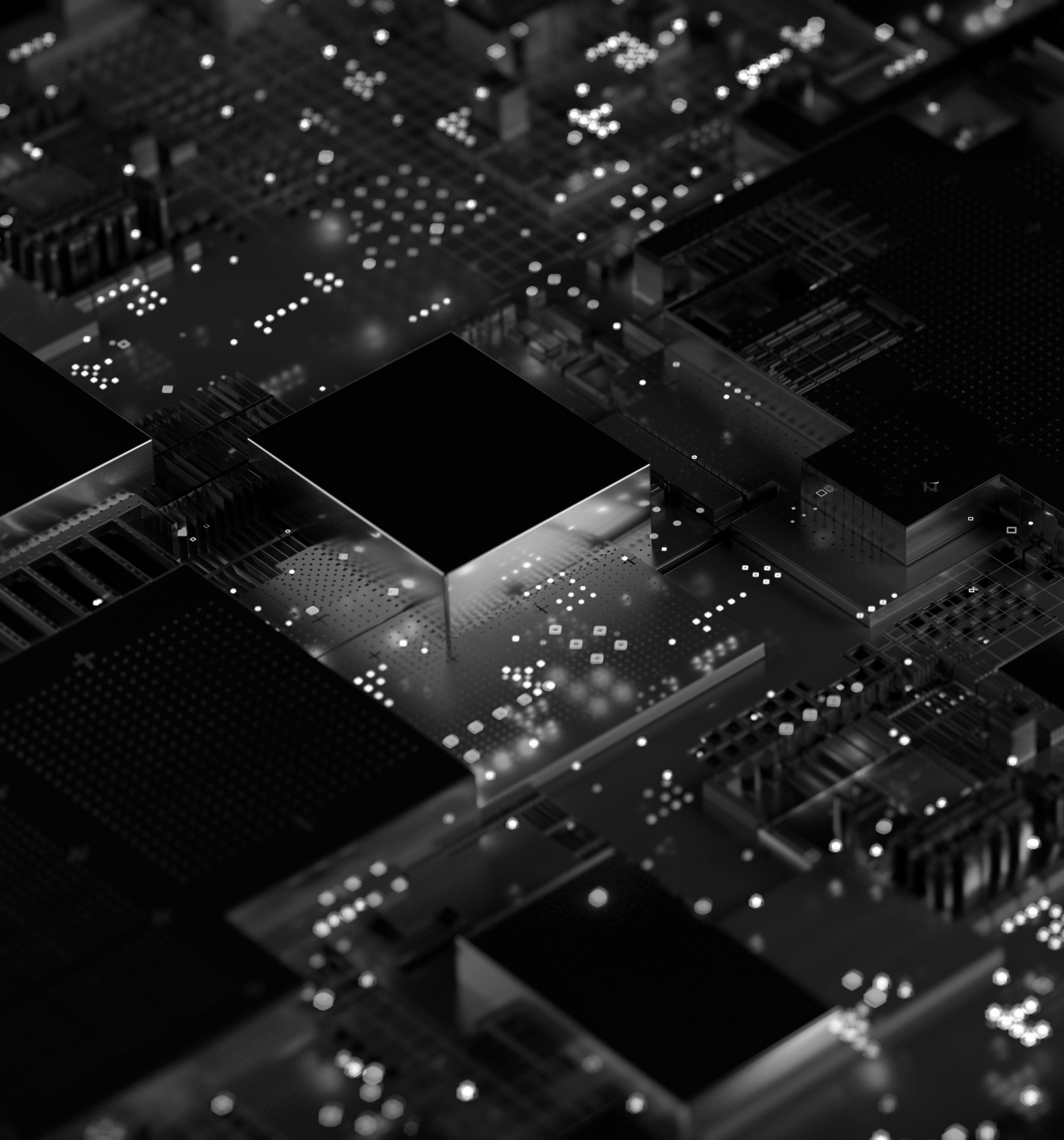
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The author thanks Prof. Dheeraj Paramesha Chaya for having read an earlier draft of this report and giving his valuable comments.

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