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UPSTREAM ENGAGEMENT: STRATEGIC UTILITY OF SOF WITHIN 21ST CENTURY WARFARE

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Exercise Solo Flight

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Maj M.E. McCloskey

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UPSTREAM ENGAGEMENT: STRATEGIC UTILITY OF SOF WITHIN 21st CENTURY WARFARE

INTRODUCTION

This is another type of war, new in its intensity, *ancient in its origin* – war by guerillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him.¹

Since the end of the Cold War, the security environment has given rise to a multitude of irregular threats throughout the globe. Western coalition forces have been engaged in a multitude of conflicts which have forced militaries to take an introspective look at the utility of military force as it has been traditionally applied. The last decade has introduced a more complex, innovative, and adaptive threat which challenges the fundamental military approach to warfare. The nature of conflict is ambiguous and defies our traditional notions of war.

No longer do nations conduct war, but rather operate in a complex area somewhere between peace and war, commonly referred to as the “gray zone”. In the face of increased global flashpoints, dwindling political appetite to engage militarily, and increased societal risk aversion, SOF is being asked to do more. While tactically successful, our operational approach needs adjusting and a more sophisticated engagement method is required to be successful.

This paper argues that the 21st century security environment has altered the nature of conflict and requires a fundamental shift in how SOF elements are employed within the strategic risk balance equation, shifting from crisis response to strategic prevention. The paper begins by framing the nature of conflict in the 21st century and demonstrates that the security paradigm is at

¹ John F. Kennedy: “Remarks at West Point to the Graduating Class of the U.S. Military Academy.” June 6, 1962. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid+8695.

odds with our operational methods. It then examines the role of risk in society and its significant impact on the conduct of military operations. A strategic risk balance model is developed to demonstrate how the impact of risk and our traditional warfighting approach are incongruent. The final section provides a theoretical framework for SOF positioning and employment within the “Gray Zone”. It proposes a fundamental shift in how we think and conduct operations, recommending a strategy of prevention which reflects the current security environment. It then highlights the strategic advantages of SOF engagement and makes recommendations on the practical application of SOF.

“Evolutionary Turn”: The End of Decisiveness and the Nation State

The current global security challenges of the 21st century present increased challenges to Canada and its allies. Recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the rise of radical Islam, has altered the balance of power and our societal notions of peace and war. Militaries engaged against the current threats have struggled to adapt their methods and doctrines to succeed against an ever increasing global threat and attempts to apply military solutions to these complexities have been largely unsuccessful.

Many modern analysts suggest that we have entered a new security paradigm. Terms such as hybrid warfare, Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), political warfare, to name a few, have all recently emerged to describe the current security challenges that now occur between the space of peace and war. Well known political strategist Christopher Coker states that the current environment has witnessed a ‘security turn’, meaning that it is not revolutionary in nature, but evolutionary adaptations which has been caused by the current global conditions.²

In *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, retired British General Sir Rupert Smith suggests conventional, traditional warfare is extinct, and war has moved from the

² Christopher Coker. *War in an Age of Risk*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 12.

battlefields to a conflict among the people.³ The implications of this evolutionary paradigm shift will fundamentally change how we fight. However, we have been slow to adapt due to our traditional understanding of conflict. This understanding which is grounded upon our experiences of fighting traditional, conventional wars, emerged in light of two World Wars, the Korean War and most recently the Cold War. This conventional state-on-state conflict required a conventional response towards a conventional threat. Therefore, our societal response to these threats gave rise to conventional forces, doctrines, and tactics which are optimized for bounded problems.⁴

While conventional warfare has continued to evolve since the 18th century, it is largely based on the Carl Von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini principles of warfare, which provided the blue-print to what is commonly referred to as the manoeuvrist approach to warfare.⁵

As Canadian Joint Publication 1.0 states,

The CF approach to operations involving combat is based upon an understanding of the nature of conflict and is consistent with the CF-recognized principles of war. ... As a result, the CF uses a manoeuvrist approach to defeat the enemy by shattering its moral and physical cohesion, its ability to fight as an effective coordinated whole, rather than by destroying it physically through incremental attrition. ... ***This is achieved through a series of rapid, violent, and unexpected actions that create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.*** ... These actions are integrated to seize and maintain the initiative, outpace the enemy, and keep the adversary off balance.

Speed, massing of effects, overwhelming force, decisive points, and the famous Clauswitzian ‘Centre of Gravity’ characterize the nature of bounded conventional thinking. As well-known academic Anthony Vinci commented on the character of war, “Due to this bias, the

³ General (Retired) Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, (London: Penguin Group), 331.

⁴ Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. “The Pentagon’s Defense Review: Not Ready for Prime Time.” Last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://issues.org/22-4/krepinevich-2/>

⁵ Department of National Defence. “Canadian Forces Joint Publication: Joint Operations 1.0” Last accessed 18 April 2016. www.publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2010/.../D2-252-2009-eng.pdf

Western way of warfare tends to try to target a central entity...and relies on high-level political negotiations to ultimately end a war.”⁶ In other words, manoeuvre warfare attempts to achieve a *coup d’oeuil* and bases its operational manoeuvre on speed, concentration of forces, and decisive battles against a visible adversary in order to establish the political conditions for positive peace.

However, the landscape of our current threat, which is characterized by trans-national, networked non-state actors driven by *a radical ideological underpinning*, conducting isolated insurgencies, rebellion, and terrorism among the population have altered the arena in which we operate. As respected scholar Mary Kaldor writes, “The implication of these differences is that whereas old wars tended to extremes as each side tried to win, new wars tend to spread and to persist or recur as each side gains in political or economic ways from violence itself rather than winning.” Wars have become increasingly ambiguous and ‘grey’ in their very nature.

Non-State Actors and Diffusion of Power

Another fundamental theme that frustrates efforts is the diffusion of power and decline of the nation state. Globalization and inter-connectivity of populations have enabled groups to organise, plan and synchronize activities that span traditional borders. As former USSOCOM Commander General Joseph Votel commented in his address to Congress, “Power and influence are now diffusing to a range of actors, both state and non-state, who have not traditionally wielded it...For the foreseeable future, instability will be driven by conflicts within and across state boundaries as much as it will be driven by conflicts between states themselves.”⁷

Radical Islamist cells in London, Paris, and Brussels can simultaneously be working to carry out global attacks, while remaining dispersed and resident among the local populations.

⁶ AnthonyVinci, “Metastrategy and the Evolving Character of War Between the US and al-Q’aeda”, in *The Character of War in the 21st Century*, ed. Caroline Holmqvist-Jonasater and Christopher Coker (New York: Routledge press), 93.

⁷ US Department of Defence. “Statement Of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command Before The House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee On Emerging Threats And Capabilities March 18, 2015.

Additionally, the increased technological advancements have provided non-state actors the means to operate at a considerably higher tempo. Operating in a networked approach, they are able to leverage expertise, develop and enhance weapons and capabilities, Command and Control, aggregate and disaggregate almost without detection, all while using those same technological tools to influence, and coerce.⁸ This connectivity of disparate groups is changing the balance of power between the traditional notion of states and group actors that can live and operate undetected throughout the globe.

Adaptational Failures

Instead of examining the strategic context and understanding the implications of the new security paradigm, western militaries have attempted to adapt their tactics, rather than the strategy.⁹ This tactical reaction has given rise to almost desperate doctrinal adaptations and theories that attempt to re-align tactics and approaches without understanding the nature of the new security paradigm. Terms such as “cognitive plane of conflict”, information operations, influence activities, and “winning the narrative” are illustrative of our continued symptomatic attempts to counter an ideological idea. These adaptations are manifested in current Counter-Insurgency (COIN) doctrines, which provided the foundational theoretical framework for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While these adaptations acknowledge the ideological nature of the threat, we continue to frame the problem and the solutions within a bounded, traditional understanding of warfare. In addition, the underlying logic assumes that the enemy is “ideologically biddable” and can be “won over” in a short period of time. As leading COIN expert Daniel Porch points out,

⁸ Wayne. M. Hall, “Intelligence Analysis: How to Think in Complex Environments”. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 11

⁹ Gian Gentile, “A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army.” Last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/09autumn/gentile.pdf>

Contemporary COIN-dinistas are basically romantics, whose strategic communications target politics and society at home while they profess to apply paternalistic theories onto biddable populations required to show gratitude for their improved conditions by outing pistoleros, bandits, terrorists, and insurgents in their midst.¹⁰

These notions have influenced military planners to assume that a set formula of creating security, developing infrastructure and governance, with a corresponding narrative, properly arranged and delivered, will equate to decisive success. This tendency and focus to achieve decisiveness through military force continues to be problematic and is incongruent with the security paradigm shift, the lack of identifiable adversary, and the ideological underpinnings of the conflict. Decisiveness must give way to prevention.

Implications

General Sir Rupert Smith bluntly states the implications of this paradigm shift. “The foundations upon which military strategies were built have ruptured, altering the certainty of historically sound security solutions. This dissolution of singular threats and conventional opponents further erodes our strategic logic and systems.”¹¹ No longer do the tenets of decisive manoeuvre warfare apply to the current security environment. This indecisive nature of military force, the diffusion of power, and the ideological underpinning of current conflict points to a long, protracted struggle against various disparate groups throughout the globe. As former DIA Head, Major-General Mike Flynn recently commented on the increasing Islamic threat, “We are perhaps entering another 100 year war.”¹²

Understanding the nature of the threat in the 21st century must shape our strategic application of force. The conventional doctrinal applications of traditional warfare are

¹⁰ Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New War of War*, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press), 319.

¹¹ General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*...12.

¹² General (Retired) Michael Flynn, “Q&A with US from. Director of Defense Intelligence Agency Michael Flynn on Mideast Crisis” Last accessed 18 April 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RIUE68cpGc&feature=youtu.be>

unsuitable. There is no secret “center of gravity” which can be destroyed, no “success calculus” or formula to apply to modern insurgencies, no decisive battle, and no nation state which is immune. The ‘grammar of war’ in the 21st century will be characterized not by speed and concentration of forces, but rather on the continued application of novel and unique responses within an almost attritional way of war.

The Age of Risk: Prevention over Victory

The second important factor for effective military strategy is understanding the societal perceptions of risk and its effect on military operations. The military’s decisive tendencies to achieve complete victory seem to be at odds with societal risk acceptance and what emerges is an ends/means mismatch. For example, the ISAF Military End State stated “ISAF’s primary objective was to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces to ensure Afghanistan would never again become a safe haven for terrorists.”¹³ While commendable, it is indicative of our desire to achieve complete positive peace. Unfortunately, the adversary, the cultural environment, the underlying core issue, and the societal risk acceptance make the end state almost unachievable.

Christopher Coker points out that the concept of positive peace is at odds with our current risk acceptance.

The declaration of war, of course used to be a timeless ritual which implied that every war had a beginning and an end: that every conflict usually ended in a peace treaty or at the very least an armistice. But these days wars do not always end even when the fighting stops. They have become an instrument of risk management, not order.¹⁴

This is a fundamental component to 21st century warfare. Good or bad, military forces are used, not to achieve decisive victory and lasting peace, but as means to reduce risk back to

¹³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). “ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001-2014)” Last accessed 18 April 2016. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm

¹⁴ Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk*... 10.

acceptable levels. Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, the head of the security and defence policy secretariat at the Danish Ministry of Defence, states that we have developed into what he calls a ‘risk society’. “Insecurity is now the norm, but at levels we may find more acceptable...Strategy is no longer a question of defeating concrete threats in order to achieve perfect security, it has instead become a way of managing risks.”¹⁵ Therefore, our strategies are developed *to minimize dwell time* in any afflicted nation, or to engage indirectly if possible. Limited air interventions in Kosovo and Libya or declared exit timelines in Afghanistan and Iraq highlight this societal risk management trend.¹⁶

However, societal risk acceptance goes beyond mere risk reduction strategies; it has changed the way we operate. For example, casualties have become a major, if not the most important, aspect in the execution of military operations. As Mikkel Ramussen acutely observed, “Casualties are no long regarded as a necessary consequence of war.”¹⁷ This has significantly skewed the calculus on military operations. Not only has risk acceptance of civilian casualties drastically changed since World War II, but society’s aversion to friendly casualties has fundamentally altered how we apply military force.

Our operational focus has shifted from finding, fixing, and finishing enemy forces to a risk prevention strategy, aimed at reducing, if not eliminating, casualties. Historically, more ‘boots on the ground’ would have been advantageous, the more boots, the better off you were. As General Sir Rupert Smith points out,

A reason cited now for this [risk aversion] is the ‘body bag’ effect: democratic governments conducting operations for ‘soft’ objectives are uncertain of the support of those at home, and as has been shown repeatedly in these pages, every

¹⁵ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The Risk Society at War: Terror, Technology and Strategy in the Twenty-First Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11.

¹⁶ Martin Shaw, *The New American Way of War: Risk Transfer War and its Crisis in Iraq*. (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2005), 102.

¹⁷ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The Risk Society at War...87*.

state and military must maintain the support of their people. The extent of the leaders' uncertainty is measured approximately but accurately in their degree of casualty aversion.

The arithmetic is therefore reversed. More boots on the ground increases the risk to force, and drives up the risk of mission success.¹⁸

This 'body bag' effect is further complicated by the adversaries' underlying philosophical approach towards casualties. While western societies are adverse to civilian and friendly force casualties, the adversary embraces this notion of sacrifice as a prime tactic to undermine western resolve. A Yale study on suicide bombings indicated that, "Suicide bombing falls into the category of altruistic suicidal actions that involve valuing one's life as less worthy than that of the group's honor, religion, or some other collective interest."¹⁹ While many claim suicide bombings reflect the radical nature of Islamist ideological belief, the employment of this tactic is intended to undermine resolve and strike at the western adversity to risk and casualties. All of this is being conducted under the constant gaze of society itself, through persistent media coverage.

The media, including social media, has become a critical military planning factor. We no longer conduct military operations, but media-mediated military operations.²⁰ Speed of information and its instantaneous impact on the political landscape has increased the complexity of military operations, making military forces somewhat vulnerable to societal perceptions. Recently addressing this very issue, Canadian Chief of Defence, General Jonathan Vance, stated,

¹⁸ Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The Risk Society at War*...112.

¹⁹ Riaz Hassan, "What Motivates Suicide Bombers" *Yale Global Online*, last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/what-motivates-suicide-bombers-0>

²⁰ Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk*...139.

“I was detecting our inability to answer questions in a timely manner and to be able to respond and deal effectively in a very dynamic and very fast paced information environment.”²¹

Therefore, this risk environment has fostered a new strategic risk balance. Illustrated below, Figure 1 below depicts the ‘risk management’ approach that is now fundamental towards achieving success. The application of force must now ensure all three ‘legs of the stool’ are aligned. Any imbalance in any one area will create conditions for potential failure. Therefore military application must be conducted within the strategic risk balance stool.

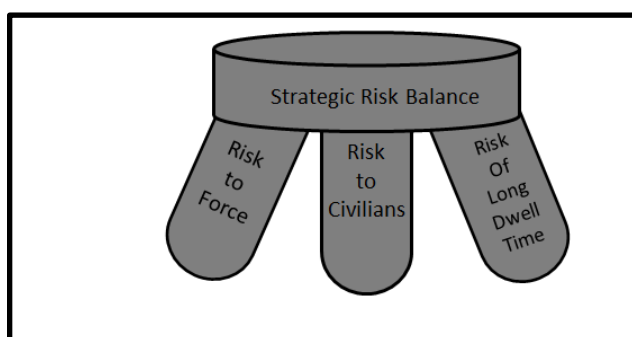


Figure 1 – Strategic Risk Balance

Implications

This strategic approach reflects more of a crime prevention strategy, than a strategy for victory.²² As well-known Political Scientist John Mueller describes our risk management approach with regard to the emergent threat, “You cannot wage war against crime, only attempt to suppress it.”²³ The focus and application of military force is used as a risk reducer, as a means to restore the operational environment to a certain level of acceptable security, while

²¹ David Pugliese Blog page “Weaponization of Public Affairs”, last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/chief-of-the-defence-staff-gen-jon-vance-and-the-weaponization-of-public-affairs>

²² Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, *The Risk Society at War*... 192.

²³ John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 116.

minimizing risk at all costs. Therefore, alignment of military forces and the new strategic balance will require a nuanced and novel approach.

Upstream Engagement and Effective Employment of SOF

Clausewitz rightly pointed out that each era has its own ‘grammar of war’, which influences and shapes military application of force.²⁴ As described earlier, the 21st century ‘grammar’ represents an evolutionary turn away from decisiveness into one of prevention, deterrence and securitization of populations. Inherent in this ‘grammar’ is the societal dimension and particular aversion to risk. Often described as “the missing middle” or the “Grey Zone”, this concept is essentially the application of Phase Zero or shaping operations.²⁵ As former US SOCOM Commander General Votel highlighted,

Our success in this environment will be determined by our ability to adequately navigate conflicts that fall outside of the traditional peace-or-war construct. In this “gray zone,” we are confronted with ambiguity on the nature of the conflict, the parties involved, and the validity of the legal and political claims at stake. These conflicts defy our traditional views of war and require us to invest time and effort in ensuring we prepare ourselves with the proper capabilities, capacities, and authorities to safeguard U.S. interests.²⁶

And while the ‘grammar of war’ may have changed, the military’s primary purpose has not. There is still an inherent requirement to implement national policy by protecting against threats to its national strategic interest.²⁷ However, our military application, particularly with regard to Special Operations Forces (SOF), has not evolved to reflect the changing nature of modern conflict.

²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton Press 1976), 991.

²⁵ US Department of Defence. “Statement Of General Joseph L. Votel, U.S. Army Commander United States Special Operations Command Before The House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee On Emerging Threats And Capabilities March 18, 2015.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy,” (U.S. Naval institute *Proceedings* 80, no. 5 May 1954), 483.

In the eyes of senior leaders, SOF is often associated with strategic raids, hostage rescues or other crisis response operations. While SOF must continue to dominate in this field, there is an inherent requirement to adapt to the evolving paradigm of 21st century warfare and re-align our capabilities in the domain between peace and war. The CAF, and in particular CANSOFCOM, lack a coherent and well defined operational approach to effectively operate in that space.²⁸

Theoretical Application of SOF

As described before, our linear approach to operations and our inherent attempts to achieve decisive victory, positive peace, and clearly defined military end states is at odds with the strategic environment. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford recently commented,

Our traditional approach is either we're at peace or at conflict. And I think that's insufficient to deal with the actors that actually seek to advance their interests while avoiding our strengths. And as an aside, you know, I don't find the current phasing construct for operational plans particularly useful right now. If you think about it, we bend authorities and capabilities according to where we think we are in a phase. And our adversaries, or potential adversaries, or our competitors, they don't actually find themselves limited by that same framework."²⁹

General Dunford's comments reflect the current paradigm between the emerging threats, the traditional crisis response application of military forces, and the nature of the environment. Figure 2 below is illustrative of military phasing and operations, which pre-disposes planners towards a linear application and tactical arrangement of activities.

²⁸ Major Matthew McCloskey, "Force of First Resort: Re-calibrating SOF for Phase Zero Operations" (Joint Command and Staff Course Paper, Canadian Forces College, 2016), 6.

²⁹ General Joseph Durnford, "Meeting Today's Global Security Challenges with General Joseph F. Dunford" (Speech at Center for Strategic and International Studies, 29 March 2016) last accessed 18 April 2016. http://csis.org/event/meeting-todays-global-security-challenges-general-joseph-f-dunford?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=%2ASituation%20Report

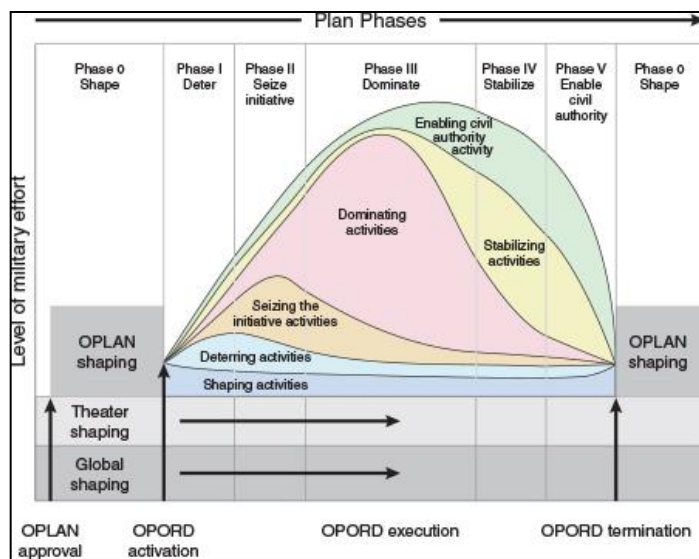


Figure 2 – Notional Military Phasing Framework.³⁰

Upstream Engagement

However, this application is contrary to how we address conflicts today. The focus must shift *from decisive action, to a strategy of prevention*. Therefore, given the security paradigm, focus of effort should be on preventing crises from emerging, rather than posturing for crisis response. As respected strategist Everett Goldman stated in his book *Pure Strategy*, “Accordingly, the more troublesome it is even to determine a beginning, much less an end to events...this larger focus is appropriate for the strategist, who seeks instead of *culmination a favorable continuation of events*.”³¹

Understanding the potential incongruity, the United States Government initiated the 2016 Summer Study on Capabilities for what they term, Constrained Military Operations. The aim of this study is to “assess the military planning, shaping, and operational activities that address

³⁰ Department of Defense. “Joint Operations 3.0” Last accessed 18 April 2016 www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_0.

³¹ Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principles in the Space and Information Age*, (New York: Frank Cass, 2005), 5.

potential threats to U.S. interests and strive to establish stability in critical regions of the world that do not rise to the level of full scale military operations.”³²

The US is not alone in attempting to address the current paradigm shift of the operational environment. Russia has recently begun to address this internally and re-align capabilities and methodologies in order to remain effective. In February 2013, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov published an article reflecting on the implications of a changing security paradigm.

Of course, it would be easiest of all to say that the events of the “Arab Spring” are not war and so there are no lessons for us — military men — to learn. But maybe the opposite is true — that precisely these events are typical of warfare in the 21st century...The very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown...they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.³³

Gerasimov suggests that given the highly connected nature of societies, situations such as the ‘Arab Spring’ can emerge almost instantaneously. Therefore, the ability to react and respond to emerging crises must align with that fact. Therefore, the application and methodologies of military forces must adapt from a traditional posture to one that is forward and preventative in nature. “Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected.”³⁴

Therefore, effective use of SOF should be focused on ‘upstream engagement’, consistently focused on areas of strategic interest in a framework of perpetual prevention. This distinction resembles more a political strategy, whereby there is no ‘end state’ but rather a continuous

³² United States of America. “MEMORANDUM FOR CHAIRMAN: DEFENSE SCIENCE BOARD”, last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://www.projectgray.org/articles/79-kendall-commissions-gray-zone-study-in-search-of-potential-new-playbook-technology>

³³ In Moscow’s Shadows: Analysis and Assessment of Russian Crime and Security, “The ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and Russian Non-Linear War.” Last accessed 28 Oct 2015. <https://inmoscowshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>

³⁴ Ibid.

engagement between the politicians of nation states, each attempting to gain position of continuing political advantage.³⁵ This concept also could be viewed, as a more focused and purposeful application of a Peacekeeping prevention strategy, where prevention and deterrence are the goals and posturing for timely response is a secondary benefit.³⁶ The measures of success, therefore, are measured over time, rather than on a specific set of objectives. Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the theoretical framework for SOF positioning.

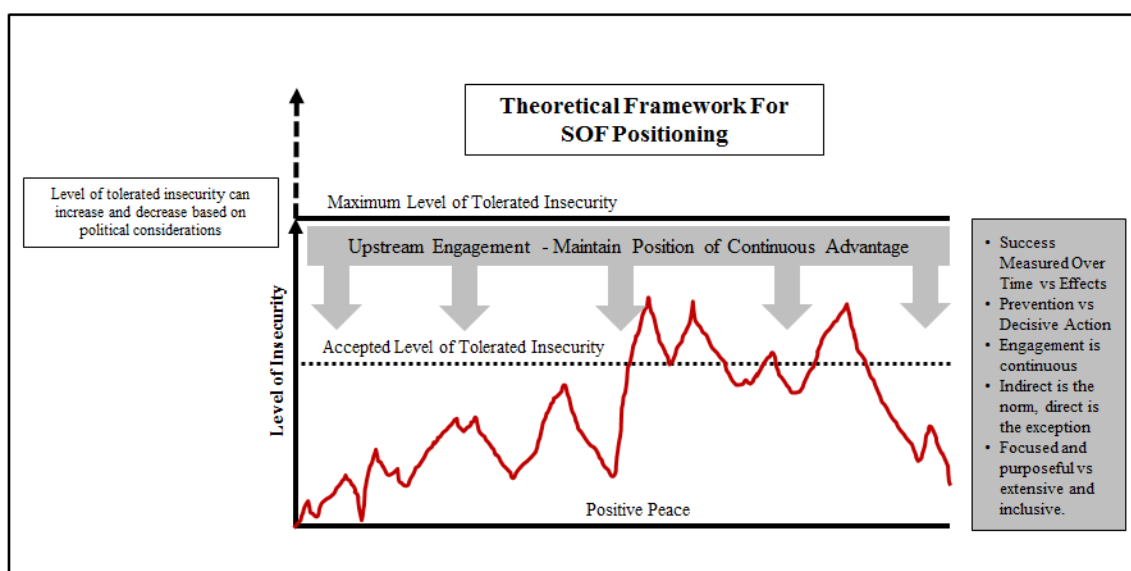


Figure 3 -- Theoretical Framework for SOF Positioning

A good example of an effective ‘upstream engagement’ is the US SOF campaign in the Philippines. While the threat of radical Islamists continue to destabilize areas of the country, SOF has adopted a long term approach to work alongside the Philippine Armed Forces “to defeat terrorists and create the conditions necessary for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Southern Philippines.”³⁷ Limited number of SOF elements, working alongside the state security

³⁵ Brian Petit, *Going Big by Getting Small: The Application of Operational Art by Special Operations in Phase Zero*, (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2013), 142.

³⁶ Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns. *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 103.

³⁷ Global Security. *Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines*. Last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/dod/jsotf-p.htm>

apparatus, has been able to maintain the level of insecurity below the level that would require a military intervention.

Therefore, the theoretical concept for SOF employment is to position SOF forces ‘upstream’ and before conflict emerges or reaches a level that would prompt military response. This strategy is based on maintaining a *position of continuous advantage*. This phase is characterized by the indirect nature of the engagement, working through the local host nation security apparatus. The intention is to assist in maintaining the level of threat below the tolerated security threshold. The tactical activities within this level will be based on the nature of the problem, the political considerations, and the nature of the threat. Examples of engagement activities could include advise and assist roles, mentoring, capacity building, and intelligence. The overall intention is to assist in maintaining the level of acceptable ‘insecurity’.

Should the level continue to rise above the accepted level, but below the threshold which would prompt a military response, SOF can augment and increase their engagement through a variety of tactical activities and authorities. Tactical activities such as support to air operations, ISR, operational liaison and mentoring, and accompaniment of host nation security forces. While the indirect nature is still maintained, the decrease of security prompts a more direct and focused application of effort.

This preventative approach should not be viewed as a panacea for success, but rather as an approach to maximize the capabilities of SOF, while minimizing the costs of military deployments and reducing risk. Should preventative action fail, SOF would be postured and positioned to support military action more effectively. Former US SOCOM Commander General Votel emphasized this point,

The very concept of “winning” must be fundamentally reexamined in the context of a future environment where we will likely not commit large military

formations in decisive engagements against similarly armed foes. A Gray Zone “win” is not a win in the classic warfare sense. Winning is perhaps better described as maintaining the U.S. Government’s positional advantage, namely the ability to influence partners, populations, and threats toward achievement of our regional or strategic objectives. Specifically, this will mean retaining decision space, maximizing desirable strategic options, or simply denying an adversary a decisive positional advantage.³⁸

Strategic Benefits to Gray Zone Engagement ***Strategic Anticipation***

As mentioned before, societal aversion to risk and the illusive nature of the modern threat emphasizes the need for ‘strategic anticipation’. As Christopher Coker points out, “The risk age puts a premium on anticipating events...The present age fears the unpredictable.”³⁹ In light of this fact, effective employment of SOF elements can significantly improve situational awareness and anticipation of potential threats. CANSOFCOM, like most CAF operations, harmonizes our collective efforts along with our allied partners. Having SOF ‘plugged-in’ to SOF allies, especially the US, provides the CAF with a unique portal to gain a deeper contextual understanding of emerging threats, benefitting from an intelligence architecture which would not normally be available through conventional means.⁴⁰

However, the most effective benefit for forward deployed SOF is through the development and maintenance of long-term relationships with host nation security partners. Due to their discreet and non-intrusive nature, SOF can increase situational understanding by working with host nation partners and developing a network of information nodes, not only within other militaries but also with Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) and Other Government

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Christopher Coker, *War in an Age of Risk...2*.

⁴⁰ Department of Defence. “The Role of the Global SOF Network in a Resource Constrained Environment”, (MacDill AFB, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2012), 31.

Departments (OGD) from like-minded nations. The mere presence of SOF teams forward, creates increased understanding in ways not available to conventional forces.⁴¹

Expansion of Choice

As Lawrence Freeman observed, “Only at moments of instability, as latent conflict becomes actual, when real choices have to be made does something resembling strategy have to be made.”⁴² Colin Gray proposes in his work *Strategy*, that the strategic utility of SOF operations is their ability to provide decision makers an increased expansion of choice.⁴³ Due to the forward positioning of SOF elements, there is an increased situational understanding of the operational environment. This deep understanding can provide options that are politically palatable and consistent with our allied or coalition partners.⁴⁴ Further, given the ability for SOF to aggregate and disaggregate into small teams, provides an option to work indirectly, through the host nation security apparatus. The low-profile, non-intrusive nature of SOF elements provides a low-cost, low-risk option that is flexible and responsive, therefore expanding options available for policy makers.

Economy of Effort

While not a replacement for poor strategy, well planned and focused SOF activities provide the Government of Canada with an economy of force option which is consistent with the overall political appetite. (CANSOFCOM’s current commitment to Iraq is illustrative of the benefits of small, focused economy of force option.) As highlighted earlier, influx of military elements don’t necessarily correlate to success.⁴⁵ Given their low-cost, adaptability, rapid deployability,

⁴¹ Brian S. Petit. *Going Big By Getting Small* ... 156.

⁴² Lawrence Freeman. *Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 611.

⁴³ Colin S. Grey. *Explorations In Strategy*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 1996.

⁴⁴ Major Matthew McCloskey, “Force of First Resort: Re-calibrating SOF for Phase Zero Operations”...9.

and ability to operate dispersed, beyond conventional support requirements, SOF can provide an economy of force option that is effective and highly versatile.

Risk Reduction

Finally, in the current risk age effective employment of SOF forces can provide an effect while lowering the political risks of deploying forces. The indirect nature of engagement, the low-profile and non-intrusive nature of SOF teams, which are capable aggregating and disaggregating and capable of operating in very small numbers provide a more discreet, politically acceptable option. This aspect of SOF continues to be desired by governments as we have seen recently by the US and Canada who have deployed more SOF elements into Iraq.

However, many claim this is nothing more than ‘strategic tokenism’. Anthony Cordesman who served as national security assistant to Senator John McCain of the Senate Armed Services Committee recently commented on the ineffective employment of SOF in Iraq. “At present, the United States still is not officially sending the right kind of train and assist personnel forward to help Iraqi forces become combat effective, rather than regroup in the rear.”⁴⁶ While this is perhaps true, it also reflects the current traditional notion that a ‘better train set’ will achieve decisive victory. This notion is indicative of our traditional notions of military application and attempts to achieve lasting security. However, as described earlier, the nature of the security environment and the strategic risk balance will not support a re-engagement. Therefore, SOF elements are a risk reducing force that can contribute towards de-escalating the insecurity, while maintaining the strategic risk balance.

Application Methodology

Alignment of Effort

⁴⁶ Anthony Cordesman. “More Special Forces: Tactical Asset or Strategic Tokenism” (Center for Security and International Studies) last accessed 18 April 2016. <http://csis.org/publication/more-special-forces-iraq-and-syria-tactical-asset-or-strategic-tokenism>

While the theoretical application of SOF employment may be clear, the practical application for a small nation like Canada becomes problematic. The nature of ‘Gray Zone’ operations imply that there is no formalized architecture for coalition efforts and therefore operations tend to be conducted under national authorities, rather than under traditional coalitions of like-minded nations. However, for Canada, coalitions are critical for any military operation, given our relative size and scope of capabilities.

In 2012, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) recognized this and saw the value in increasing and expanding cooperation with other like-minded SOF elements. Former USSOCOM Commander, Admiral McRaven, developed and implemented a Global SOF Network which is focused on increasing and improving coordination of SOF activities against the emerging threats. The nature of the Global SOF Network is informal and inclusive, attempting to maximize efforts and synchronize effects. It reflects the evolutionary change of 21st century warfare and acknowledges the paradigm shift of the security environment.

Therefore, it is important to develop a concept for integrating not only with traditional allies, but with non-traditional partners, while still maintaining our national strategic purpose. Canadian Army Officer, LCol Andrew Vivian, developed the concept of “Convergent Operations”. He defines convergent operations as follows:

Convergent Operations are operations undertaken jointly by two or more nations that confer mutual benefit outside the structure of a coalition or alliance. Nations engage in Convergent Operations in order to share strengths, minimize risks, and increase competitive advantages at the operational and tactical levels in pursuit of unilateral strategic interests.⁴⁷

This methodology recognizes that the costs of independent engagement are beyond the scope of countries such as Canada, but that there are mutual strategic interests that exist between

⁴⁷ LCol Andrew Vivian. “Convergent Operations” (PowerPoint Presentation to CANSOFCOM SOF Symposium, personal copy).

a number of like-minded nations. Convergent operations maximize the value proposition of military activities by increasing strategic dividend and reducing risk.⁴⁸

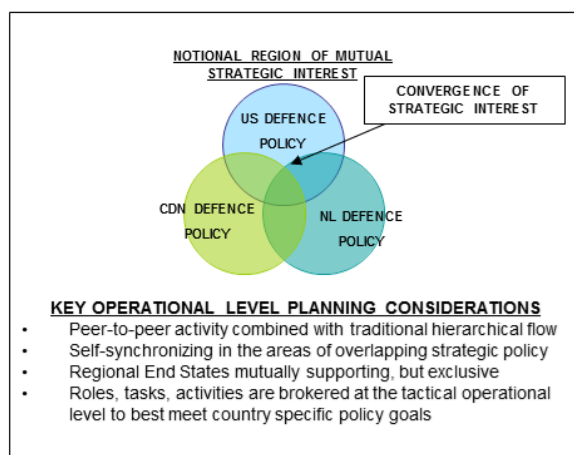


Figure 4 – Convergent Operational Approach

For smaller nations such as Canada, adopting a convergent operational approach enables them to benefit from the existing posture of countries like the US, France, and the UK, synchronize and de-conflict efforts within a cooperative venture, and maintains national strategic focus.

CONCLUSION

As General Sir Rupert Smith bluntly stated, “war no longer exists”. While not revolutionary in nature, the new security paradigm has taken an evolutionary turn and has frustrated our abilities to be successful. The evolution of a networked, trans-national adversary has hampered our abilities and questioned the traditional utility of military force. SOF elements continue to be required, and although tactically successful, it is the strategic application of force must be reexamined.

The paper began by framing the nature of conflict in the 21st century and demonstrated that the security paradigm is at odds with our operational methods. While military operations aim to

⁴⁸ Ibid.

achieve decisive victory, our abilities to achieve that are incongruent with the security environment and the adaptive threat that is emerging. It then examined the role of risk in society and its significant impact on the conduct of military operations. It demonstrated how the strategic risk balance and our traditional warfighting approach is incongruent with political will and who we are fighting. Finally, a theoretical framework for SOF positioning and employment within the “Gray Zone” was developed and based around the concept of prevention, rather than on decisive victory. It proposed a fundamental shift in how we think about and conduct operations, recommending a strategy of pro-active prevention which is more conducive to the current security environment. Highlighting the strategic advantages of SOF engagement within, it made recommendations on the practical application of SOF within an informal, multi-national operating environment.

While ‘upstream engagement’ should not be viewed as a panacea for success, there is a requirement to conduct an introspective look regarding the effectiveness of our how SOF is employed. Effective, focused and timely employment of SOF allows Canada to shape and remain informed of areas of strategic interest, while minimizing upsetting the strategic risk balance. In light of the new security paradigm the CAF will a shift in application from what it has been accustomed to.⁴⁹ While still preserving its precision strike capabilities, there is a requirement to evolve our operational approach to reflect the current security environment. The military leadership must view ‘upstream engagement’ or prevention operations with as much importance as we treat crisis response. For future success will not be decisive nor in the ability to respond to crises, but based largely on the ability to influence and shape emerging threats that

⁴⁹ Major Matthew McCloskey, “Force of First Resort: Re-calibrating SOF for Phase Zero Operations”...9.

fall outside the traditional notions of war and peace and *prevent them* from escalating beyond the level of tolerated insecurity.

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