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FORCE OR FIRST RESORT: RECALIBRATING SOF FOR PHASE ZERO OPERATIONS

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FORCE OF FIRST RESORT: RECALIBRATING SOF FOR PHASE ZERO OPERATIONS

AIM

1. This service paper argues that Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), with particular focus on CANSOFCOM, lacks an effective framework to operate in Phase Zero and makes recommendations on how the SOF can be better enabled to operate in this domain. Effective engagement in Phase Zero will require a cultural and doctrinal shift for the CAF to be capable and comfortable operating in the undefined spaces between peace and war.

INTRODUCTION

2. The military's primary purpose is to implement national policy by protecting against threats to its national strategic interest.¹ Recent conflicts have suggested that our participation has been costly and largely ineffective against the modern non-state adversary. However, when decision-makers think of SOF they frequently associate SOF activities with strategic raids, hostage rescue or the capturing of high value targets. While SOF will continue to maintain this core capability, there is a requirement to recalibrate our efforts to address emerging threats in the domain between peace and war.

3. The recent events in the Ukraine, the conflict in Syria and the increase of state-sponsored warfare has given rise to a multitude of complex conflicts throughout the globe. This new and evolving threat has been categorized as Hybrid War, Fourth Generation Warfare, Unconventional Warfare, and Political Warfare to name a few. Regardless of how this trend is categorized, this innovative threat will remain constant for the foreseeable future. In the face of increased global flashpoints and dwindling political appetite to engage militarily, a more

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy," (U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 80, no. 5 May 1954): 483.

sophisticated engagement method is required. The CAF, and in particular CANSOFCOM, possesses unique capabilities, yet lack a coherent and well understood doctrinal concept to operate in the space. Commonly referred to as “the missing middle” or the “Grey Zone”, in essence it is the military application of Phase Zero operations.² “This phase involves those joint interagency and multinational activities conducted on an ongoing, routine basis to assure or solidify friendly relationships and alliances *and/or deter* potential adversaries.”³

4. This paper will begin by articulating the fundamental principles for SOF application in Phase Zero operations. It then expands on the strategic utility of SOF in Phase Zero, also highlighting the common barriers that continue to complicate our efforts within that domain. Finally, it provides recommendations which would further enable CANSOFCOM to operate within the complex environment of the future.

DISCUSSION

5. **Phase Zero Operations: Principles of SOF Application.** In Phase Zero, SOF can provide unique options and it is in this domain that SOF distinguishes itself from the other traditional services.⁴ While each theatre of operation differs, there are some underlying principles that need to be applied in order to capitalize on SOF effects in Phase Zero operations.

² 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.

³ Department of Defence. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States. JP 5-0. Vol. 1. (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011), III-42.

⁴ In general, CANSOFCOM provides a key component of the CAF contribution to the national and global security through precision strike and special warfare operations. Both of these approaches are inextricably linked and mutually supporting and it is the synchronization and integration of both in a holistic SOF Campaign Plan that produces the most complete and enduring effects. Precision Strike is defined as, the execution of intelligence driven activities in a precise manner that employ special operations forces in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence threats with minimal collateral damage. Special Warfare is defined as the execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and nonlethal actions taken by a specially trained and educated force that has a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat

- a. **Indirect.** The underlying characteristic of SOF in Phase Zero operations is the indirect method of engagement. While this necessarily implies a potential lack of positive control over the outcomes, the tenets of indirect action lends itself towards enabling others to achieve success. While less efficient in the short term, the long-term advantages of enabling others can provide the foundational underpinnings required for success. (US SOCOM efforts in Colombia and Philippines are good examples of successful indirect efforts within Phase Zero operations.)
- b. **Small Footprints – Networked Together.** CANSOFCOM’s unique ability to disaggregate and operate, with limited support requirements can create disproportionate effects in areas that are beyond the capabilities of conventional forces. These small footprints, networked together by robust communications platforms, provide a more discreet, politically acceptable, and focused application of force.⁵ By adopting a minimalist and dispersed approach, small footprints reduce dependency and foster host nations to take a leading role, while minimizing political risks of military forces in the area of operations.
- c. **Civilian Led - Whole of Government Approach.** SOF activities within Phase Zero must be intergovernmental and civilian led. SOF elements will work alongside the existing civilian government elements and support strategic/political objectives. CANSOFCOM’s unique domestic mandate has enabled it to foster robust relationships with other governmental partners at home, which can be

formations in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment. (Taken from unpublished draft CANSOFCOM Doctrine – private copy).

⁵ Due to increased political tensions, often Host Nation partners want to downplay the support they are receiving from western forces. Therefore, SOF supports this by its discreet and low-profile operating methods, while minimizing political risk.

exploited globally. Particularly, our close cooperation with CSIS and the RCMP can act as a catalyst for future operations. In addition, the flattened hierarchical structures of CANSOFCOM, allows SOF elements to maintain flexibility and shared strategic understanding, creating unity of effort across government departments.

- d. **Slow Progress and Focused Application.** Recent operations have demonstrated that quick, decisive actions are largely ineffective against insurgents and terrorists. The concept of “nation building”, using a combination of security, governance, and reconstruction has proven to be ineffective without long term investment and enormous costs. The nature of the current conflicts represents protracted affairs and therefore, a slow, manageable and deliberate pace is often the best method of engagement. Moreover, surging SOF may not directly relate to increased success and will impact their ability for effective, sustained, long-term engagement. Therefore, **priority of effort and focused application** of SOF is paramount.

6. **Phase Zero Operations: Strategic Advantages.** Phase Zero operations are nothing new. The United States has a very well developed capability and has demonstrated that it is comfortable operating in that space. As well, there is a growing interest by many countries to align their SOF for Phase Zero operations, as it provides a unique response to a highly complicated environment. For example, Russia’s new military doctrine of 2014 is indicative of this growing trend.⁶ However, Canada is largely unfamiliar and inexperienced with this concept and has been unable to maximize the use of SOF within the “missing middle” environment. As a

⁶ 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://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/the-gerasimov-doctrine-and-russian-non-linear-war/>

result it has been unable to fully benefit from the strategic advantages of deploying SOF elements working in Phase Zero environments. These advantages include:

- a. **Economy of Effort.** While not a substitute for bad strategy, activities carried out by SOF provide the Government of Canada with an economy of force option for engagement. (CANSOFCOM's current commitment to Iraq is illustrative of the benefits of small, focused economy of force option.) Recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan also highlight that the influx of military elements doesn't necessarily correlate to improved results. Given their unique characteristics, particularly their cost, adaptability, and rapid deployability, SOF elements provide political leaders with a cost-effective and highly versatile option, which can be applied almost immediately, while costing considerably less than larger conventional capabilities. Early engagement of SOF into areas of strategic interest will be able to provide disproportionate effects, particularly as it relates to the following two points.
- b. **Enhance Strategic Understanding.** SOF elements can significantly improve contextual understanding of the situation. Like most CAF operations, CANSOFCOM works alongside our allied SOF partners when conducting operations. Having SOF elements forward and engaged alongside US SOF elements allows CANSOFCOM to benefit from this allied SOF intelligence architecture.⁷ However, it is most effective through long-term relationships with Host Nation partners and other organizations. SOF can use its extensive network and increase the level of understanding by not only among other SOF elements but also through Non-governmental Organizations (NGO) and Other Government

⁷ 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. Finally, the low-profile and discreet nature of forward SOF teams can enable unilateral intelligence collection on behalf of the GoC, all aimed at informing decision makers with accurate and timely information. The mere presence of SOF teams forward, creates increased understanding in ways not available to conventional forces.⁸

- c. **Expansion of Choice.** The strategic utility of SOF operations is their ability to provide decision makers with increased expansion of choice.⁹ This is achieved in two main ways. First, SOF elements who are forward, engaged, have an increased understanding of the operational environment and the nature of the threats and can provide options which are politically acceptable and overall consistent with allied partners.¹⁰ Second, the application of SOF in a Phase Zero environment allows GoC to engage indirectly, using small-footprint elements to work through host nation/partners to achieve objectives. This option can only be offered by SOF, who is able to disaggregate teams, operate in small footprints, well beyond the conventional support mechanisms.

7. **Barriers to Effective Phase Zero Operations.** While the utility of SOF in Phase Zero operations is clear, there are numerous barriers that limit its overall effectiveness in theatres. The most glaring, and arguably the most important, is the lack of coherency among government departments. Unlike the United States, the Canadian embassies do not maintain complete authority over all government departments. Rather, the policies and direction of the GoC in any given country is centrally controlled. This centralization of authorities from Canada inhibits

⁸ Brian S. Petit. "Going Big By Getting Small: The Application of Operational Art in Phase Zero", (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, 2013), 156.

⁹ Grey, Colin S. Grey "Explorations In Strategy". (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 1996.

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unity of effort and complicates planning and prioritization efforts, thereby lengthening decision making. This ultimately means that department policies are not integrated into a holistic approach within the embassy and its application is disjointed. For example, CSIS, RCMP, CANSOFCOM, GAC all have ongoing programs within various countries, but there lacks a single coordinating arm to maintain coherency and focused prioritization. Therefore, decisions are made in silos and do not necessarily reflect the requirements on the ground.

8. The very nature of Phase Zero operations implies that they fall outside the normal operational framework and authorities that militaries are comfortable operating in. For each military operation, the CAF will define an area of operations, assign assets and implement restrictive coordination measures to offset risk. Usually this process occurs after a situation has evolved and is largely based on crisis response. However, outside of the loosely coupled Global Engagement Strategy, there are no mechanisms to conduct Phase Zero operations.¹¹ This requirement for establishing a “theatre of operation” constrains and slows procedures to an alarming pace.

9. Finally, the ability for the military to expand or increase operational outputs must be tempered with patience. While the military can leverage the institutional planning capabilities and large resources that are inherent to the organization, this is not true for policy. Therefore, at times, military actions tend to develop impetus all on their own, and can, at times, outpace political policy. To be successful in Phase Zero, military actions must be commensurate with

¹¹ Department of National Defence. “Global Engagement Strategy: Strategic Guidance”, National Defence Official Guidance Document, 2014, 4. The Global Engagement Strategy refers to the focused and tailored engagement undertaken by the Defence Team with partner countries and organizations around the world to build and maintain cooperative relationships to advance Canadian defence interests and priorities. Defence diplomacy draws on a range of activities and resources and employs the entire Defence Team - military and civilian – as well as defence equipment and assets. Over time, the dividends of defence diplomacy directly enable the execution of the defence mandate and support broader Government of Canada national security and foreign and trade policy priorities.

policy and adopt a deliberate, measured approach in order to mitigate unforeseen policy fratricide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. **Create an Operational Phase Zero Framework with Funding and Authorities.** The CAF framework for operating in Phase Zero is largely conducted under the Global Engagement Strategy. This strategy was developed as a mechanism to focus and prioritize CAF activities in support of political objectives. “National Defence has developed the Global Engagement Strategy (GES) to guide defence diplomacy efforts in support of the Government of Canada’s national security, foreign policy, and international security objectives and commitments.”¹² Unfortunately, the scope of the strategy is too broad and inclusive and is nothing more than a grouping of every tactical activity that the CAF undertakes outside of major operations. Therefore, any activity can be justified under the GES framework. The Steering Committee, although chaired by Adm (Pol) and SJS DOS, delegates implementation to the various Level 1 HQs without formalized guidance. Moreover, funding for GES is non-existent and therefore Level 1 HQs are required to harmonize existing activities and budgets in order to achieve objectives articulated within the GES. This fosters a culture of doing what you have the physical and budgetary capability of doing, and the means available create an impetus all on their own. The result is a poorly coordinated, ineffective, dissolution of energy lacking coherency and focus.

11. For SOF to be effective in Phase Zero, the GES framework needs adjusting or complete abandonment. Rather, the CAF and SOF require an operational framework for conducting Phase Zero operations that is focused on the core strategic interests of Canada, in areas that would

¹² Department of National Defence. “Global Engagement Strategy: Strategic Guidance”, National Defence Official Guidance Document, 2014, 4.

benefit from a forward SOF element. This framework should provide the Commander with authorities and funding for all Phase Zero related activities, while prioritizing efforts and focus and ensuring accountability.

12. **Increase WhoG Interoperability.** Although many understand SOF capabilities, there continues to be erroneous or mystified ideas regarding SOF capabilities. While SOF's ability to conduct precision strike operations is well known, its ability to navigate complex and highly nuanced theatres is not well understood. CANSOFCOM needs to educate and inform other government departments and agencies in order ensure decision makers are making use of a valuable tool. The current formulation of CANSOF doctrine will assist in this regard.

13. There is also a requirement to formalize relationships with like-minded security agencies. For example, CSIS, the RCMP, CSE and CANSOFCOM have operated closely in a number of theatres; however these groupings have always been ad hoc in nature. However, both organizations can provide complementary effects in theatre and benefit from their unique capabilities. Integrating efforts in areas of mutual interest could have disproportionate effects and increase success. Understanding that this will take authorities outside of the purview of the CAF, an inter-departmental policy to authorize and formalize interoperability should be developed and implemented.

14. **Recalibrate Our Engagement Strategy.** Currently, CANSOFCOM is conducting Phase Zero in a number of countries around the globe, albeit in an ad hoc manner and without the formalized operational frameworks to better enable and link tactical/strategic objectives. Many of these operations revolve around capacity building missions of host nation military forces. These engagements are episodic and often short term in order to maintain SOF's operational tempo. The lack of persistent presence impacts our ability to influence, enhance our

understanding, and expand Canada's choices to the level required for decision makers. If we are going to move beyond benign capacity building and be comfortable operating effectively in Phase Zero, we will need to recalibrate our engagement strategy. In particular:

- a. CANSOFCOM needs to be in fewer but higher priority locations. It needs *purposeful and persistent* engagement for longer periods of time. Episodic engagements are unable to develop the right relationships and foster the requisite trust with host nation partners. Frequent short-term rotations impact continuity and expertise.
- b. SOF needs to increase and dedicate and increased intelligence assets to better enable SOF Teams with forward, technical/tactical intelligence collection capabilities and enhanced intelligence training in order to better enhance strategic understanding.
- c. Expanding tactical competencies in non-kinetic areas such HUMINT, Psychological Operations, and Civil Affairs will provide a variance of tools required to maintain persistent and purposeful engagement.
- d. The CAF and CANSOFCOM needs to treat Phase Zero with as much importance as we treat the other phases of war and given the unique complementary capabilities CANSOF provides the CAF.

CONCLUSION

15. The recent conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine have caused many western democracies to conduct an introspective look regarding the political, budgetary, and operational feasibilities of the modern way of war. A new, arms-length, networked strategy is required.

While Phase Zero should not be viewed as a panacea for conflict, it allows Canada to shape and

remain informed of areas of strategic interest. For CANSOFCOM to remain relevant within the current security environment, it will require a shift in application from what it has been accustomed to. While still maintaining its precision strike capabilities, more effort is required to formalize how we conduct Phase Zero operations, both from an institutional and organizational standpoint. The CAF needs to treat Phase Zero operations with as much importance as we treat the other phases of war. Success in the future will lay in our ability to influence and shape emerging threats that fall outside traditional conflict and not in our abilities to react to crisis.

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