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## Where does SOF go when conventional forces/civilian capability begin to occupy what were core SOF capability areas?

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SERVICE PAPER - ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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**Where does SOF go when conventional forces and civilian capability  
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**AIM**

1. To apprise Commander CANSOFCOM of the concept of employment and capability development of SOF.

**INTRODUCTION**

2. Background. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are known to be elite units specially generated to prosecute missions with strategic effects but often associated with higher risks due to conditions of ambiguity and chaos.<sup>1</sup> However, as soon as conventional forces adapt and innovate (often with the help of technology) to mitigate the risk factors of such missions, they become equally capable of undertaking to undertake such missions. For instance, SOF specialized in “deep” operations that were considered to be relatively risky because higher command had no means to support these operations due to the reach of communication technology.<sup>2</sup> However, with advancement in technology, conventional forces are able to mitigate the risks and undertake these “deep” operations.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that SOF “has been replaced”.

3. Concept of SOF Employment. The concept of SOF employment must take on an “Art” definition to ensure consistency. SOF’s capability area cannot be defined by numerical factors

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<sup>1</sup> D. Michael Day and Bernd Horn, "Canadian Special Operations Command: The Maturation of a National Capability," *Canadian Military Journal* 10, no. 4 (Autumn, 2010), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Marvin Leibstone, "Special Operations Forces & 21 Century Warfare," *Military Technology* 33, no. Special Issue (2009), 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

such as distance, duration or fire power. Any attempt to do so would be a contemporary effort to satisfy specific doctrinal needs such as Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP). As soon as conventional forces evolve to be able satisfy these numerical factors, SOF would have to redefine its capability or risk “losing their job” to conventional forces. Instead, SOF’s capability must always reside one bound ahead of conventional forces in terms of mitigating risk.<sup>4</sup> Their purpose in the “toolbox” of the war-maker is to prosecute missions with risk that would otherwise be unacceptable when undertaken by conventional forces<sup>5</sup> With this concept, SOF must appreciate the eventuality of conventional forces fulfilling their current job scope and always look one bound ahead to operate outside the risk tolerance associated with conventional forces.

4. Military Strategy- Role of SOF and Conventional Forces in Tackling Irregular Warfare (IW). In today’s Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment, it is unlikely that the adversary will strike to oppose the mass of the defence force, the conventional forces.<sup>6</sup> The adversary will adapt and innovate with technologies (such as 3D-printing and drones) to strike in ways that the military is least prepared for.<sup>7</sup> This can be classified as IW and be the main form of warfare in the future as the likelihood of state-on-state conventional head-on is increasingly remote.<sup>8</sup> IW is also a contemporary concept that remains “irregular” until conventional forces are able to deal with it on a systemic and sustainable basis, then it loses its

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<sup>4</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, *Canadian Special Operations Forces Command: -An Overview* (Ottawa: Chief of Defence Staff, 2008), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Robert G. Spulak Jr, "A Theory of Special Operations," *Military Technology* 33, no. Special Issue (2009), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Day and Bernd Horn, "Canadian Special Operations Command: The Maturation of a National Capability," , 70.

<sup>7</sup> Eric T. Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly* 1, no. 56 (2010), 65.

<sup>8</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, *Canadian Special Operations Forces Command: -An Overview*, 4.

edge as “irregular” and downgrades into regular warfare.<sup>9</sup> As such, the strategy for modern warfare is to be able to apply a “quick fix” to newly conceived IW while racing the Observe, Orientate, Decide & Act (OODA) loop to find a systemic and sustainable “fix”. In application, the role of SOF is to be the “quick fix” and the first responder to IW, while conventional forces must evolve quickly to deal with and in the process, downgrade IW to regular warfare.

5. Roadmap. This paper opined that SOF’s mission is never specific and will continue to evolve along with technology, capability of conventional forces and modus operandi of emerging threats. As such, it will propose the concept of employment and capability development of SOF for the future. It will do so by highlighting Full-Spectrum Capability, Operational Secret (OpSec) and Operational Tempo as the core issues that SOF must retain to ensure its continual relevance to the military.

## **DISCUSSION**

6. Full-Spectrum Capability. It is critical that SOF maintain full spectrum capability due to the erratic nature of IW.<sup>10</sup> The nature of IW is to target the military where it is least prepared<sup>11</sup>. As such, for SOF to live up to its purpose of being a “quick fix” to IW, it must be prepared to answer to IW threats in whichever way they present themselves. Given limited resources and capacity of the organization and its people, SOF cannot possibly be the masters of all trades. The SOF must adopt a Tailor-to-Task capability by anchoring upon a few key competencies that

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<sup>9</sup> Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," , 65.

<sup>10</sup> Admiral William H. McRaven, *Posture Statement of Admiral William H., USN, Commander United States Special Operations Command before the 113th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee* (Washington DC: United States Senate, 2014), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," , 65.

are transferrable across the full spectrum of operations.<sup>12</sup> In addition, it must develop agility in employing these key competencies to achieve the Tailor-to-task effect. The rest of this section will focus on intelligence, access and power-to-the-edge as key competencies that SOF must harness in order to fulfill its purpose as the “quick fix”:

a. Intelligence. While intelligence is a necessity for all mission types, it is especially critical for SOF missions because of the requirement to deliver very precise effects both kinetically and non-kinetically.<sup>13</sup> The following sub-paragraphs present the unique appreciation of intelligence by SOF.

(1) Leveling the Odds. As threats are not confined by boundaries, it would be foolish to adopt a localized effort to counter these threats.<sup>14</sup> Canada and its allies share the same terrorism threats that are likely to share many commonalities such as leaders, resources and techniques. By cross-sharing these information, SOF will hasten its OODA loop and be better prepared for the adversary.

(2) Indicator for Long-Term Investment. As there is an increasing demand for non-kinetic options towards IW, there is a need for SOF to acquire non-kinetic competencies such as cultural and language appreciation in order to infiltrate into

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<sup>12</sup> Major M.E. Mitchell, "Strategic Leverage: Information Operations and Special Operations Forces" Naval Postgraduate School, 1999), 84.

<sup>13</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, *Canadian Special Operations Forces Command: -An Overview*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> McRaven, *Posture Statement of Admiral William H., USN, Commander United States Special Operations Command before the 113th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee*, 2-3.

the demographics of neutrals or adversaries.<sup>15</sup> These are competencies that require a long duration to harness. As such, intelligence is a critical indicator to guide the investment of these SOF resources. (See para 5b(2) and 6b(2) for more details about SOF long-term investments on non-kinetic competencies).

b. Access. To achieve full spectrum capability, SOF must possess the capability to access denied areas in order to “fix” it.

(1) Kinetic Access. Traditionally, “access” is strictly defined kinetically. As such, it is common for SOF all over the world to be trained in a myriad of insertion methods via land, sea or air through advanced methods such as All-Terrain Vehicles (ATV), assault diving and Military Freefall (MFF) etc.<sup>16</sup> This continues to be an important competency for SOF as kinetic access to denied areas is a condition that enables subsequent actions.

(2) Non-Kinetic Access. However, as IW adopts a less kinetic approach, the solution set should also move away from non-kinetic options. The United States Department of Defense (DOD) identifies that the focus for IW should be on effective governance of populace rather than dominance of territories.<sup>17</sup> In governing and influencing the populace, SOF must exhibit cultural mobility to gain non-kinetic access into the “trust groups” for effective governance and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3; Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," , 65.

<sup>16</sup> De B Taillon, J Paul, *Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms*, Vol. 6 (Ottawa: Royal Military College of Canada, 2005), 71.

<sup>17</sup> Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," , 65.

influence. This means that SOF must be culturally attuned and linguistically fluent within the Area of Operations (AO).<sup>18</sup> While Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) mandates GBA Plus training, it is opined to be of elementary standard only sufficient to avoid issues of cultural sensitivity. For effective cultural infiltration, an advanced or even native standard of cultural and language appreciation is required. Besides imposing more intensive training, CANSOFCOM can also look to recruit from the ethnically diverse Canadian Society.<sup>19</sup>

c. Power-to-the-Edge. As the military's "quick fix" to IW, it is vital that SOF is nimble to respond to these threats as and when they emerge. To achieve this nimbleness, it is appropriate that the SOF community adopts the Albert & Hayes model of "Power-to-the-Edge" by decentralizing command and empowering the tactical troops.<sup>20</sup> This can be achieved at two levels:

(1) Capability Development. To be effective in dealing with adversaries who are technologically adaptive and innovative, it is also critical that SOF stays at the forefront of technological advancement. While this is an arms race, SOF must demonstrate professionalism and prudence in financial matters to continue to have "privileged access" to state-of-the-art technology. While it can be argued that this "privileged access" is granted to SOF because it is less costly (as a result of smaller numbers), this paper emphasized that this "privileged access" to state-of-

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<sup>18</sup> De B Taillon, J Paul, *Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms*, 68.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> David Stephen Alberts and Richard E. Hayes, *Power to the Edge* (Washington, DC: CCRP Publication Series, 2003).



the-art technology should not be born out of budget allowance, but rather necessity to combat threat.

(2) Rank Texture. The conditions of SOF missions require decisions with high strategic value to be made at the lowest tactical level. As such, it is critical that the rank texture of SOF continues to command a premium over the conventional forces' to commensurate the difference in job complexity. For instance, the rifleman in an infantry platoon is of Private (PTE) rank and the same cannot be applied for the SOF operator as he is expected to possess a wider range of competency and leadership traits to make critical decisions. The CAF must appreciate the longer training duration required to train a SOF operator through the commensurate rank texture. This serves for recruitment, retention and motivation of SOF troops.

(3) Small Unit Tactics (SUT). Simplicity in structure and processes is a key element to achieving agility during operations. As such, maintaining the concept of operating in small units allows SOF to be nimble and modular to meet the full-spectrum operational demands. SOF should continue to operate in small numbers to negate the complexities brought about by structural red tape, multi-layer chain-of-command and multi-folds coordination to prosecute their missions. As such, SUT should continue to be the hallmark of SOF operations in achieving the tailor-to-task capability.

7. Operational Secret. While OpSec is a standard protocol for all military operations, it is critically more important for SOF operations because of it being the first response force to IW and that the VUCA environment ensues that nations must have the ability to exercise military power flexibly without being attributed.<sup>21</sup> The following elaborates the importance of OpSec for SOF:

a. Deny Complete Information to Enemy. While the SOF community actively gathers intelligence on the enemy, it must conversely deny this information to the enemy. As the adversary is more likely to engage in IW to strike the nation where it is least prepared for, it is critical that the competency of the “quick fix” be kept unknown from adversary.<sup>22</sup> And since the adversary remains unknown in a VUCA environment, the competency of SOF should be controlled on a need-to-know basis. However, there is a high degree of difficulty to hide SOF from the eyes of today’s media.<sup>23</sup> To compound matters, it is also observed that SOF has shied away from their calling of “quiet professionals” and leaned towards limelight of being a “superstar” soldier.<sup>24</sup> In 2004, the covert deployment of CANSOF to Haiti was quickly uncovered after CANSOF operators were photographed in classic SOF image of fit bodies, sunglasses and baseball caps.<sup>25</sup> The concept of OpSec is not just about operating in smaller numbers, but more importantly in smaller footprints. SOF should reintroduce the culture of “quiet

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<sup>21</sup> De B Taillon, J Paul, *Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms*, 71; Malcolm Brailey, *The Transformation of Special Operations Forces in Contemporary Conflict: Strategy, Missions, Organisation and Tactics* (Australia: Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2005), 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," 65

<sup>23</sup> De B Taillon, J Paul, *Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> “Quiet Professionals” is a term first coined to describe the United States Special Forces. Later this mantra has been adopted by Special Forces around to describe Special Forces as people who sacrifice without the need for acknowledgements.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

professionals” to cultivate the mentality of “blending in” rather than “standing out”. The need to feel “special” may indeed be a critical pitfall for SOF’s ability to maintain OpSec. With operators dressed in multicam uniform that is only exclusive to CANSOF, perpetrators can now easily identify, stalk and extract information from SOF operators through their routines and network of connections. While it may be argued that the “special attention” is required to boost the confidence and ego of SOF operators to excel in high stress environment, one can look to the success of the US Delta Force.<sup>26</sup> The US Delta Force prides themselves as the “Quiet Professionals” and has remained one of the US Army’s most reliable resources despite not having been widely publicly acknowledged for any achievements.<sup>27</sup>

b. Proliferation of Clandestine Operations. As state conflicts are increasingly expected to take the form of IW, SOF must provide the means to deploy military force “flexibly, minimally and precisely”.<sup>28</sup> At the extreme, this means clandestine operations. In this aspect, CANSOFCOM must allow Canada to exercise its military power with little to no signature.<sup>29</sup> Clandestine operations can be classified into short-term and long-term. In both cases, the key success to an operation being clandestine is the inability to trace the operator back to his host country. This means that the operator must assume a low-profile life-style without being seen as a well-publicized SOF operator.

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<sup>26</sup> Spulak, "A Theory of Special Operations," 25.

<sup>27</sup> Rowan Scarborough, "Delta Force: Army's 'Quiet Professional': Operate in Shadows, Not in Spotlight," Jun, 2012. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/jun/3/delta-force-armys-quiet-professionals/>.

<sup>28</sup> Gray Colins, "Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?" *Parameters* 29, no. 1 (Apr 1, 1999), 168-174.

<sup>29</sup> Brailey, *The Transformation of Special Operations Forces in Contemporary Conflict: Strategy, Missions, Organisation and Tactics*, 8.

(1) Short-Term Kinetic. Short-term operations are mostly kinetic in nature and usually results in the rapid and precise destruction of enemy property or extraction of intelligence. These require “high testosterone-driven techniques” and are often within the conventional competencies of SOF to infiltrate, operate and exfiltrate independently without any linkages back to the host nation.

(2) Long-Term Non-Kinetic. As elaborated in the earlier paragraphs, non-kinetic operations require a high degree of cultural and language competency. For the operation to be non-attributable, the operators need to have already assimilated into the population as a “sleeping agent” then prosecute the mission whenever required. This operation is classified as long-term because the process of demographic assimilation and military disassociation requires a long duration of time, averaging no less than ten years.

8. Operational Tempo. As mentioned earlier, the military is in a constant OODA race to combat the adversary. With SOF assuming the role as the “quick fix” to IW, it is inherently important that SOF maintains the operational capacity to develop their capability in anticipation of the next IW. The longer SOF dwells in the current IW without the intervention of conventional forces, the lesser time SOF has to focus on capability development. From a defence perspective, IW, once taken its form (for instance active shooter terrorism) will proliferate at a mass scale that renders it beyond the means of SOF to man. While the military has taken steps to alleviate the loading on SOF by outsourcing various support components to other combat arms, the adversary can easily “outnumber” SOF by simply creating multiple

incident sites all over the country.<sup>30</sup> As such, the military must adopt a strategy that quickly downgrades IW into regular warfare such that it can be dealt at a larger scale by conventional forces. It can be argued that SOF should not sit idle on a capability development job scope because the SOF combat “sharpness” when not used will be lost.<sup>31</sup> This paper does not disregard the need for SOF to be constantly engaged in order to maintain its “sharpness”. It advocates that SOF continues to be assigned missions that are shrouded with ambiguity and asymmetrical conditions.<sup>32</sup> However, to allow SOF to continue dwelling in the operations that has already been downgraded by conventional forces is to create a sense of complacency rather than maintaining combat “sharpness”.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, doing so will stagnate the military’s strategy of using SOF to “quick fix” and conventional forces to “downgrade” IW.

## CONCLUSION

9. In conclusion, this paper clearly defines the job scope of SOF as a “quick fix” to IW and conventional forces to downgrade IW to regular warfare as part of a larger military strategy. It highlights that SOF should not dwell in fighting the current IW because it will eventually be “outnumbered” or too preoccupied to prepare itself for the next wave of IW, thus failing its purpose within the larger military strategy.

10. In fulfilling its purpose as the “quick fix”, SOF should continue to focus on developing full spectrum capabilities but with added emphasis on the non-kinetic dimension as IW will increasingly be more about governing populations rather than dominating territories. SOF

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<sup>30</sup> Olson, "U.S. Special Operations: Context and Capabilities in Irregular Warfare," 68.

<sup>31</sup> De B Taillon, J Paul, *Canadian Special Operations Forces: Transforming Paradigms*, 71.

<sup>32</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, *Canadian Special Operations Forces Command:-An Overview*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Leibstone, "Special Operations Forces & 21 Century Warfare," 29.

should also remain agile and nimble throughout its organization to effectively respond to IW threats. Most importantly, this paper reminds that SOF should remain the quiet professional and exercise OpSec right from the very basics of daily routines.

11. Last of all, the biggest challenge for SOF is not about conventional forces “taking their jobs away”. Rather, it is the preoccupation of SOF to dwell in the current IW and not fulfill its purpose of developing its capability for the next wave of IW.

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