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OPERATION IMPACT – A STUDY OF THE CANSOFCOM CONTRIBUTION

Maj Kevin Schamuhn

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OPERATION IMPACT – A STUDY OF THE CANSOFCOM CONTRIBUTION

Refs:

- A. TELCON with DCO 3 PPCLI (former DTFC Task Force Ukraine and G5 1 CMBG), 2 Feb 18.
- B. Email from Chief Instructor CSOR, 1 Feb 18.
- C. Email from Dr. Jack Cunningham, Ph.D, University of Toronto, 2 Feb 18.
- D. PERSCON with Maj. H. Christian Breede, Ph.D, RMC, 30 Jan 18.

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to examine the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) contribution to Operation Impact in Iraq from October 2014 to present. This study is intended to provide COS Ops at CJOC with a detailed analysis of the various factors involved when employing SOF on operations and assist in increasing the level of awareness of SOF operations among conventional force planners at CJOC.

BACKGROUND

2. On 5 September 2014, the Government of Canada announced that it would send between 50-100 Special Forces soldiers to act as advisers supporting the Kurdish Security Forces battling ISIS in Iraq. Eventually the mission grew to 200 Special Forces soldiers and an Air Task Force, as well as a logistics support base and Role 2 medical facility. Known as Operation Impact, the mission was recently extended until the summer of 2019.

3. Since the mission began, few details have been made public about the specific role of the Special Forces in theatre. The consistent message broadcast to the Canadian public was that the Special Forces were conducting Advise and Assist operations with Kurdish forces in a high risk

environment. The Canadian government has been adamant that the Canadian soldiers are not involved in a combat role.

4. Based on the information available, a logical question arises about why the Special Forces are the primary land forces component of the mission. Having obtained extensive experience in an advisory role in Afghanistan, it can be argued that the Canadian Army is well-equipped to take on the mission in Iraq. Why then, has the task remained with CANSOFCOM? This paper will seek to answer this question by providing a detailed analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of employing CANSOFCOM as the primary land component on Operation Impact.

DISCUSSION

5. Political Factors. Arguably the most significant advantage of deploying SOF on the mission in Iraq is related to political risk. IAW Ref C, Canada's Special Forces are highly regarded by their American colleagues, so deploying them was likely noticed by, and elicited a favourable response from, the United States. By selecting CANSOFCOM for the mission, it gave the government the highest chance of success in its foreign policy objectives in the region while mitigating political risk as much as possible.

6. Mission Parameters. SOF units are uniquely trained for specific types of missions, including unconventional warfare. When Canada decided to deploy its forces to work with tribal Kurdish militias in order to achieve specific battlefield effects as part of Operation Impact, CANSOFCOM was the force of choice. They were deployed as a low density force (in terms of

number of personnel involved), employed to achieve high density battlefield effects. However, IAW Ref A, had the mission involved training a standing army, as was the case in Afghanistan, the conventional Army would have been well-suited for the mission. Therefore CANSOFCOM remains the most appropriate organization to fulfill the land force requirements on Operation Impact until such time as the mission expands to include training all Iraqi Security Forces for routine security operations.

7. Deployment Timeline:

- a. One advantage of deploying CANSOFCOM as the land component is the deployment timeline. At the time of the government announcement in 2014, a humanitarian crisis was brewing in Kurdistan and threatened the annihilation of an entire community of Yazidis living on Sinjar Mountain in Northern Iraq. The only forces on the ground at the time were USSOF. In order to take meaningful action to assist in the resolution of the situation, Canada would need to deploy a task force very quickly. CANSOFCOM was the only force capable of deploying in a short enough timeline to meet the original mission requirements.
- b. CANSOFCOM maintains a high readiness task force that can deploy anywhere in the world on short notice. The recall system is highly effective and is regularly rehearsed; a task force can be on strategic lift on route to a new theatre of operations within a matter of hours after receiving their orders. The Canadian Army also maintains a high readiness task force, known as the Immediate Response Unit (IRU). The task force is based on a battalion sized formation and rotates between Canada's three brigades every six months. The amount of time required to deploy the IRU into theatre is over a week. As such,

CANSOFCOM's shortened deployment timeline offers a significant advantage to the government when responding to urgent situations overseas.

8. Risk to Force. Another advantage of deploying CANSOFCOM as the primary land component involves the mitigation of physical risk. By design, CANSOFCOM constantly deploys on high risk missions and its forces are adept at mitigating risk through extensive training and mission preparations. The soldiers are trained to a higher standard of skills than their conventional counterparts, including marksmanship, first aid, communications, and tactics. Their employment in areas of conflict involves less physical risk than the employment of conventional soldiers from the Canadian Army.

9. Capabilities. CANSOFCOM maintains a number of capabilities that are unique to the command which provide a significant battlefield advantage over conventional forces. Equipped with state of the art communications gear, weapons systems, vehicles, optics, ammunition, and personal protective equipment, the soldiers of CANSOFCOM are better prepared for conflict zones than the conventional forces. When CANSOFCOM deploys to a theatre, it can leverage its capabilities and its technological overmatch to achieve precision effects that are faster and of a higher quality than those of conventional forces.

10. Networks:

a. One of the most significant advantages of deploying CANSOFCOM on operations as the land component is the networks they maintain with other organizations, both domestic and international. Because Canada does not operate unilaterally, connections with coalition partners are critical to mission success. CANSOFCOM maintains a strong working relationship with the SOF community from Five Eyes nations

(US, UK, Australia, and New Zealand), some of whom maintain operational bases around the world. These units are also linked in with government agencies that can provide critical intelligence in the early stages of an operation. With these connections, CANSOFCOM can get established in a new theatre in a remarkably short period of time and gain access to a wealth of intelligence needed to provide the Canadian government with decision quality information.

b. CANSOFCOM also maintains close links with other Canadian government agencies including the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the Communications Security Establishment of Canada (CSEC), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and Global Affairs Canada (GAC). Based on these relationships, CANSOFCOM is uniquely positioned to participate in a whole of government approach to operations and can integrate its forces rapidly. The result is that CANSOFCOM is able to leverage significant capabilities from other government departments, thereby increasing the overall effectiveness of the mission.

11. Conditions Setting. One advantage of deploying SOF prior to conventional forces is that they can set conditions for follow-on elements. Based on their connections with other Five Eyes nations and other government agencies, CANSOFCOM can quickly assess the situation in theatre and establish a solid foundation for the future deployment of larger conventional forces. CANSOFCOM can re-deploy just as easily as they deploy, which provides them the ability to lay the ground work and handover the mission to conventional forces quickly and efficiently.

12. Operational Security. By nature, CANSOFCOM forces deploy with a lower profile than conventional forces and are highly trained in conducting covert operations. By minimizing their

signature, they can avoid unwanted public and media attention. During Operation Impact, CANSOFCOM deployed a fleet of low profile armoured vehicles which blended into the local traffic patterns. By doing so, it enabled the forces on the ground to conduct operations without being noticed by the local population.

13. Coalition Forces. In the fight against ISIS, the majority of contributing nations did not deploy conventional ground forces anywhere near the front line. The conventional forces that did deploy, including US, UK, German, and Italian, worked at host nation training centers conducting basic soldier skill courses for the Kurdish, similar to the Canadian mission in Ukraine. All of the Advise and Assist work that was being done with Kurdish forces near the front lines and during major operations was being conducted by SOF elements. By deploying elements from CANSOFCOM, Canada was able to achieve a much more meaningful impact in support of the host nation. Although basic training is a necessity for the long-term security of the region, it was the work on the front lines in conjunction with coalition SOF that provided the greatest amount of support to the Kurdish fight against ISIS.

14. Procurement:

a. CANSOFCOM is unique in its ability to implement an independent procurement cycle. Faced with an incredibly innovative and determined enemy in Iraq, CANSOFCOM elements were vulnerable to constantly evolving methods of attack. With the development of the VBIED capability, ISIS was able to strike specific targets within a four kilometer radius with little to no warning. Coalition air assets were unable to identify and prosecute these targets fast enough to mitigate the threat to friendly forces. Based on

the amount of armour on the VBIED vehicles, it was nearly impossible to destroy them prior to detonation.

b. IAW Ref B, CANSOFCOM initiated a rapid procurement cycle to obtain a new weapon system that had the range and power to destroy these VBIEDs. Within a period of nine months, CANSOFCOM had researched the optimal weapon system, sent a team to the country of origin to receive training, procured the weapon system, shipped it into theatre, and then trained multiple CANSOFCOM personnel to employ the systems on operations. Eventually, the weapon system was employed in the defensive role and directly contributed to the strength of the host nation's defensive positions. The speed with which this process was completed could not have been achieved with conventional forces based on the limitations of the Canadian Army's procurement system.

15. Innovation:

a. By nature, CANSOFCOM soldiers are empowered to be very innovative. Often deployed with only vague direction, the soldiers are accustomed to improvising their equipment to achieve optimal results. Though this ability to innovate exists in conventional forces, it is rarely observed to the same degree. CANSOFCOM deliberately selects and trains its soldiers based on their ability to think creatively and develop unique solutions to complex problems.

b. IAW Ref B, one example of CANSOFCOM's innovation during Operation Impact is the implementation of the SUAV capability. Based on the geographical restraints imposed on CANSOFCOM elements, they were only able to establish SUAV launch sites in specific locations behind the front line of own troops (FLOT). Based on

these restrictions, the SUAVs were unable to fly far enough to provide an effective sense function for the host nation elements. One of the members of the CANSOFCOM team developed a solution to extend the height of the antennae which essentially doubled the range of the SUAVs. This minor innovation had a significant impact on operations. As mentioned, innovation is not unique to SOF, but the frequency with which CANSOFCOM soldiers apply this skill is far beyond what is typically observed in conventional units.

16. C2 and CSS. When CANSOFCOM deploys a task force on operations, the C2 and CSS footprint is very small, which enables the task force to focus on achieving effects. On Operation Impact, the Deputy Task Force Commander, a Major from DHTC, is responsible for commanding day to day operations of the task force along with approximately 12 HQ personnel; the majority of the positions in the task force are filled by operators working with host nation forces. In accordance with Ref A, a conventional task force with the same mission set would likely have been based on a combat arms battalion supported by a National Command Element (NCE) and a National Support Element (NSE). The size of a conventional task force would be considerably larger and require substantially more logistics support than a SOF task force. Because of CANSOFCOM's empowerment of its soldiers at every rank level, it is capable of deploying task forces that are much smaller and more agile than the conventional Army.

17. Capacity. One of the greatest disadvantages of deploying SOF on operations is capacity. The Canadian Army is significant larger than CANSOFCOM and has the ability to generate task forces to rotate through the theatre of operations with far less overlap than SOF. Many CANSOFCOM soldiers have deployed on Operation Impact several times, in some cases multiple times within the same calendar year. Despite the task force being capped at 200

personnel, CANSOFCOM units do not have the depth required to sustain large operations for long periods of time. This tempo can take a heavy toll on the soldiers involved, especially when considering the other operations and training exercises conducted by CANSOFCOM units. If the conventional forces were to take over the land component of the mission, they would be able to sustain a far more manageable tempo based on the amount of forces available.

18. Aid to Civil Authority. When CANSOFCOM conducts operations, it typically has very little interaction with the local population other than for sustainment purposes. If the mission involves a humanitarian crisis, CANSOFCOM is not designed to deal with such situations. Their strength in OPSEC becomes a vulnerability when dealing with large groups of the civilian population. For example, when contingency planning for the possible collapse of the Mosul Dam north of Mosul, it became evident that CANSOFCOM elements would become dangerously exposed during a humanitarian crisis and would likely be withdrawn back to a central base of operations. SOF's capacity to deal with tasks that involve large scale aid to civil power is limited, whereas a conventional army force would be more suited to support. Based on the Army's domestic mandate and experience dealing with disaster relief and their willingness to interact closely with the general public, their employment would be an advantage in this regard.

19. Victims of Success. When CANSOFCOM is deployed by the government to accomplish a mission overseas, its personnel focus their efforts to achieve the highest degree of success possible. By mitigating the political risks and achieving rapid mission success, CANSOFCOM could create a situation in which the government may rely too heavily on the capability. CANSOFCOM is at risk of becoming an easy solution for the government to implement in times of crisis, which inevitably decreases the government's reliance on its conventional forces. In

turn, this over-reliance will lead to capacity issues among CANSOFCOM units and decreased experience for the conventional forces.

CONCLUSION

20. There are many advantages to deploying SOF as the primary land component of any Canadian task force, but doing so must be done with due consideration for the disadvantages and risks involved. The lack of political appetite for accepting risk in Iraq is likely one of the main factors involved in the decision to deploy CANSOFCOM as the primary land element. Another major factor in the decision to employ SOF is that the mission involved training a tribal militia force to achieve a specific battlefield effect, which is a unique SOF task that involved unconventional warfare.

21. Aside from political and mission factors, there are a number of tangible advantages to deploying SOF over conventional forces. It is in the best interest of planners from both the SOF and conventional Army communities to understand how and why SOF is employed on operations and how it can be leveraged to achieve mission success in concert with conventional forces wherever possible.

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Prepared by: Major K.J. Schamuhn, JCSP 44

Prepared for: COS Ops CJOC

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